ELECTRONIC EDITION

Legacy

of Perfect Enlightenment

BOOK ONE

Secrets of the Lotus Sutra

The Buddhist anthology on the enlightenment embodied in the invocation of Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo

by Harvey Kraft



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DEDICATION

I dedicate this anthology to my children — Andrew, Lani and Jaime.
I hope you cherish it as I cherish you.

In addition, I dedicate these five books to all in my family; the many friends I had when I was younger; those who have passed on; those who have held on; those I met along the way; those who have yet to manifest; and, those who, like me, return after some absence.

Secrets of the Lotus Sutra

ANTHOLOGY

Secrets of the *Lotus* Sutra anthology

Legacy of Perfect Enlightenment

The Lotus Sutra is Buddhism's ultimate legacy.
This powerful and ancient poetic scripture
reveals the secret of who we are.
It proclaims that all mortals inherently possess an unbounded
immortal nature. Ignorance of this profound
cosmic reality is the cause of suffering.
The illumination of this everlasting identity of life
causes bliss and wisdom to flow forth from those who invoke it.

LEGACY OF PERFECT ENLIGHTENMENT

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The Hidden Gem

At the hidden core of all living beings is a gem of unsurpassed beauty pulsating with the joy of eternal fulfillment. To discover it, reveal it, polish it and help others do the same defines the pursuit of enlightenment — the purpose of Buddhism. The complete study of Buddhism contains tens of thousands of volumes aimed at directing people toward this objective. As a philosophy, Buddhism is the study of enlightenment. As a religion, Buddhism is the practice of actualizing it.

2
Sage of the Sakyas

The foundation of Buddhism rests upon 50 years of profound teachings expounded by a man commonly known as the Buddha — the Enlightened One. Before acquiring this honorific testament to his spiritual achievement, he was born of royal standing at or about circa 563 B.C.E., according to inconclusive accounts of Indic origin. Even less reliable Chinese records placed his birth at a much earlier date (c. 1,028 B.C.E.).

Prince Siddhartha was crown heir to the throne of the Sakya clan (Dynasty of the Sun), a small nation ruled benevolently by the Gautama family headed by King Suddhodana and Queen Maya. She died seven days after he was born. Although his overprotective father raised him in secluded splendor on a vast estate where his every desire could be fulfilled, he grew tired of indulgences. He preferred challenges — tests of skill. A courageous hunter and pursuer of excellence in all endeavors, Siddhartha was referred to as the Lion of the Sakyas and Heir to the Lion Throne.

The Gautamas ruled from Kapilavastu — a city-state located on the northern rim of India (present-day Nepal) at the foot of the Himalaya Mountains. Although by age nineteen he already married and had a son, Siddhartha still had not ventured outside his imperial confines. One day, taking the occasion to explore beyond the walls of the Sakya palace he saw people plagued by sickness, old age, and death. Devastated by these conditions he felt obliged to comprehend their origin and find their solution. He abandoned his royal trappings and embarked on a search for the meaning of life. Eleven years later, at age 30, the Sage of the Sakyas (Skt *Sakyamuni*) completed his quest and attained enlightenment. Immediately thereafter he began to unveil the cosmic wisdom he had gained. He had become the Buddha.

While to date archaeologists have not found any relics from the Buddha's time, there is a significant body of tangible evidence that has testified to his appearance. Sakyamuni left behind a legacy of teachings — diligently recorded, meticulously

preserved, and orally transmitted through the ages until they could be recorded in writing. Conveyed in a rich poetic language, the Buddha's sermons consisted of thousands of volumes (Skt *sutras*) — a collection of scriptures encompassing his visionary outlook on existence. The sutras track his pronouncements for a period of 50 years begining soon after his enlightenment until the last moments of his life.

At the start of his course he told his listeners that he had pursued the discovery of ultimate truth, not only in his present lifetime but over numerous existences. His untiring devotion over so many lifetimes earned him an enlightened eye, a far-ranging telescopic and cosmic vision, giving him in present existence the ability to peer across time and space and dimensions beyond. He impressed a growing flock of disciples with extraordinary mystical visions shattering their preconceptions and leaving them wanting more. Followers gathered from throughout India drawn by a desire to embark upon the journey that eventually led one to such a lofty state. Thus the Buddha conveyed that enlightenment is the ultimate evolutionary path. He urged those who would pursue it to cultivate a burning desire for ultimate Truth for only it could liberate a mortal being from the continuing cycle of suffering.

Sakyamuni's teachings have had an exceptional impact on the world. Today, nearly one-third of the planet's population has identified in some way with the teachings of the Buddha. Predicated on respect for the sanctity of all life forms and the pursuit of personal spiritual fulfillment, over the past 20 centuries Buddhism has flourished throughout the Asian continent — in India, southeast Asia, China and Japan. The diverse Buddhist cultures that developed among these Asian nations led to a prodigious spectrum of artistic expression.

The poetic images expounded in the Buddhist *sutras* prompted the construction of ornate temples and the creation of iconic sculptures and paintings that came to be used as an integral part of religious rituals. Physical portrayals of the Buddha usually depicted a robust man radiating inner bliss — symbolizing enlightened fulfillment. This image of a sage who embodied supernatural cosmic grandeur came to represent his divined manifest body. Those who crafted this larger-than-life external figure considered it a metaphor, not an objective reproduction. Actually, his physical body should have been wiry, strong, and well-suited for walking the thousands of miles he traversed in spreading his gospel. Furthermore, Sakyamuni led a group of mendicant followers who consumed only enough nourishment to sustain themselves — eating once at midday in respect for the general scarcity of food, and in conjunction with their meditative regimen.

The Buddha's image acted as a reminder of Buddhism's principal spiritual enigma: "What is the true body of the Buddha?" The body in question transcended mere form. It was a metaphor for Life. Hence, the fascination with it represented three profound metaphysical questions: "What is the scope of mortal existence?"; "What is the fundamental nature of life?"; "What is the essence of being?"

Given the difficulty of interpreting the mythic language that the Buddha used to impart his views and the difficulty inherent in the subject matter, over several centuries Buddhism evolved into a fragmented religion composed of many schools espousing a range of doctrines. Although the large number of Buddhist sects have rendered it the world's most didactic major religion, in reference to non-Buddhist religions Buddhism has shown an unparalleled tolerance for other views and a desire for finding common ground on the basis of shared human values. Sakyamuni had left a life-affirming, peace-loving tradition designed for the welfare of all living beings, not just a group of believers.

Did the Buddha intend for Buddhists to find their own path from among his many doctrines or did he leave behind a specific doctrine and method that would lead all humanity to enlightenment? This not necessarily either-or question may be at the heart of Buddhism's doctrinal factionalism.

The Buddha defined two types of enlightenment: Perfect Enlightenment, the boundless enlightenment of a buddha, and a sage enlightenment, a state-of-being nearly that of a buddha. Buddhists have regarded Perfect Enlightenment to be so rare and difficult to attain that generally they considered it to be outside the reach of human experience. However, some who possessed mystic skills for gaining cosmic insight into the Buddha's mind were said to be able to attain a sage enlightenment. Those who believed that Perfect Enlightenment could be reached by humans usually insisted that only a few evolved individuals could really do it.

According to some, enlightenment can be reached through a number of paths. Others have put their faith in one path, or transcended all paths through no path. Still more Buddhists have not aspired for enlightenment at all. Instead, they prayed for the Buddha's protection and beneficence through a variety of rituals. However they envisioned the idea of enlightenment, all Buddhists derived their beliefs from some part of the Buddha's 2,500-year-old progressive seminar. In the culminating treatise of this course, called the *Lotus Sutra*, he clearly stated his goal: to lead all mortals, without exception, to no less a destination than Perfect Enlightenment.

From the inception of his teachings he compared Perfect Enlightenment to the trunk of a tree from which the branches of mortality extended. He hinted at a gem

of enlightenment that remained hidden below the cognitive surface of human life. He continuously spoke of his vision as a vehicle for transporting willing believers to the promised land of ultimate Reality. After more than four decades of careful preparation, in the eight-year-long sermon constituting the *Lotus Sutra* the Buddha introduced the "direct vehicle" of Perfect Enlightenment, the means for accessing a state-of-being equal to his own.

During his 50-year discourse, the Buddha espoused a range of precepts to aid clerical disciples in purifying their body and mind. After his passing, many elder monks who followed the code formed a monastic community dedicated to the worship of the Buddha as a divine manifestation. Eventually their doctrines rooted in Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka) and from there they spread to the cultures of southern Asia. Monks of this school (Skt *Theravada*) writing in the Pali language penned the first commentaries on the Buddha's teachings in a canon called Sacred Traditions (Skt *Abidharma*) and in the process developed his earliest (c. 80 B.C.E.) biography. Still this profile came some 500 years or more following the Buddha's passing and some fifteen hundred miles south of his home province.

Nearly 200 years later, Indic Buddhists espousing an exoteric (Skt *Mahayana*) form of Buddhism produced a biographical mythology depicting the Buddha as the divine manifestation of the universe's wisdom. Credited as its author, poet-priest Asvaghosa (app. c. 100 C.E.), said to be twelfth among a lineage of twenty-four consecutive Buddhist patriarchs starting with Sakyamuni, offered rich details about the Buddha's lifetime that he may have inherited from orally transmitted records. In keeping with Buddhism's traditional mythic verse, he conveyed the spiritual meaning of Sakyamuni's story rather than adhering strictly to a factual recounting.

Accordingly, the young prince Siddhartha first emerged outside the walls of his palatial estate only when he had already reached adulthood. Deeply affected by the poverty and misery he saw beyond the pristine grounds, he determined to forsake his life of uninhibited comfort and luxury in search of the cause for human suffering. Leaving behind a wife and infant child, the next King of the Sakyas gave up his throne and embarked on a religious quest. Donning a robe of rags, the prince departed for the mountains. There he found teachers skilled in meditative and ascetic practices.

Brahmanism was the indigenous religion of his day. It decreed life on earth to be cosmic punishment. It viewed all mortals as sinners who must endure existence in a world of suffering (Skt *saha*). Accordingly, every living being was bound by a

virtually endless cycle of mortality kept in place by human attachment to desire and instinct. One's present life experiences reflected a personal chain of birth, death, and rebirth crafted in past lives, while one's present thoughts and actions forged the links that determined future existence. Among the religious class, Brahmins, the way out of the morass of mortality was through personal liberation from desire. They sought union with the gods by purifying their spiritual self of delusions. Success meant the extinction of the unwanted birth cycle. To that end, mature adult males first fulfilled their social responsibilities by raising self-sufficient families. Then, they left to wander the forests in search of spiritual liberation within Nature. They spent the balance of their years practicing meditations and asceticism in an attempt to break the earthly bonds that imprisoned their spirit.

By Siddhartha's time the search for emancipation drew young male participants from wealthy noble and merchant families. Although born to a life of relative ease, they rebelled against materialism. Hence, Siddhartha's abdication reflected his time. Nevertheless, considering his royal rank, family status, and young age the scale of his rejection of social convention must have been shocking, even by the standards of a society where religious life was deemed a most worthy pursuit.

Siddhartha spent several years mastering the arts of meditation and strictly following a course of extreme self denial. Determined as he was in pursuing his cause, he could not achieve the supreme enlightenment he sought. Finally, after forsaking a fasting that brought his emaciated body to the precipice of death, he renounced his tortuous practices by accepting a bowl of rice in boiled milk from a kind-hearted woman. The experience taught him that any attempt to liberate the spiritual from the physical was futile, because the two were not two. If that was the case, he pondered, then what was the true nature of existence? Fixing his mind on that point he entered a trance state (Skt *samadhi*) through a deep, concentrated meditation achieved by sounding an ancient life-affirming syllable, *OM,* and envisioning a jewel (enlightenment) within a lotus blossom (life). There in a tranquil garden spot called *Gaya* (biosphere) under the shade of a broad-leaf pipal fig tree, he experienced Perfect Enlightenment seemingly in a flash.

According to Asvaghosa's mythic biography[1] of the Sakya sage, the Buddha-to-be succeeded by outwitting the giant serpent deity of fundamental darkness, the celestial Demon King (Skt *Mara)* who ruled the mortal realm of desires. Looming before the threshold into *nirvana* (Skt, the dimension of absolute peace, bliss and

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[1]*Buddhacarita* [The Deeds of the Buddha] by Asvaghosa (pronounced Ah-shva-gosha).

extinction from rebirth) this sovereign of ignorance and illusion offered the sage special dispensation — immediate and easy entry into enlightenment. However, when the Sakya sage fearlessly announced that before he entered *nirvana* he must first "establish innumerable buddha-lands throughout the universe" (meaning: he intended to lead innumerable mortals into enlightenment), the Demon King gave out a great cry of horror and disappeared. In chasing the guardian of the treasury of ultimate wisdom, at age thirty Siddhartha Gautama transformed himself into the all-knowing, all-seeing Enlightened One (Skt *Buddha*), savior-teacher of humanity and Declarer of Truth (Skt *Tathagata*) regarding the ultimate meaning of existence.

Sakyamuni ascended to the highest condition of being — personifying existence freed from the bounds of ordinary consciousness. He grasped the universe that lay beyond relativity. Having broken through the veil of mortality, simultaneously he experienced past, present and future; transcended all suffering, worry and earthly desire; and instantly released himself from spontaneous birth and rebirth.

Immediately the Buddha resolved to lead others to the enlightenment he had experienced. He began by revealing that his accomplishment was the culmination of countless lifetimes of selfless deeds. Sakyamuni's initial teaching offered that in the cosmic order of all things the deeds of selflessness stood next to buddhahood as the highest form of existence. To illustrate, he illuminated an overarching strata of existence — a transcendent metaphysical dimension inhabited only by selfless beings (Skt *bodhisattvas*). This initial teaching, a rich metaphoric chronicle called the *Flower Garland Sutra* featured a galactic-size lotus blossom at the center of a lotus garden universe called the Land of Actual Reward — so-called because the selfless deeds of its residents resulted in their gain of ethereal bodies. These exceptionally wise and caring beings dedicated themselves to ultimate Truth which they aspired to fathom fully by ascending various stages of selfless dedication. The *bodhisattvas* studied and served under the Buddhas of the Ten Directions (i.e., all buddhas throughout the universe) over inconceivable lengths of time. Due to their honor of enlightenment everywhere in the universe, they acquired angelic powers to save people anywhere mortals appeared. Therefore, whenever a buddha manifested as a teacher of mortals, they also materialized as his attendants. This *sutra* held that when people prayed to any buddha, his angelic messengers came to their aid.

Word of this unprecedented cosmic sermon spread quickly throughout India. Although its content was beyond the immediate grasp of the established religious community, news of the extraordinary teacher who composed this impressive doctrine drew the attention of the most earnest religious minds in the land.

Thousands flocked to hear the golden words of the golden-skinned Sakyamuni who fulfilled the greatest aspirations of India's religious seekers. A new movement was born following this holy sapient whose radiant and august appearance reflected his grand achievement. Finally, they encountered a human being who broke the earthly bonds and attained the wisdom of the universe. The Enlightened One (Skt *Buddha*) drew a growing number of disciples who revered him for his unequaled panoramic vision. Hence, they addressed him by such honorable appellations as the Declarer of Truth (Skt *Tathagata*), the Wheel-Rolling King (the Sovereign Keeper-Operator of Universal Laws), and World-Honored One (Most Respected Being in the Universe).

Although the *Flower Garland Sutra* revealed a grand new cosmology based on selflessness, for practical reasons Sakyamuni did not elaborate on it again for more than a decade. Instead, he introduced a code of conduct suited to the immediate capacity of the great majority of his new followers. Many of them had followed extreme and obsessive disciplines in an exhaustive attempt to achieve extinction. To persuade these wandering monks to abandon fanatical asceticism and follow a more balanced course, Sakyamuni provided them with a set of guidelines that would place them on the path to ultimate wisdom — principles that would serve as their launch vehicle for a journey he would lead them on across the vast cosmos of existence.

The first principle the Buddha proposed was that enlightenment lay between the two apparent realities of form and formlessness. He suggested that in the middle of the road of life the two sides of spirit and substance converged into one indivisible, undifferentiated Reality. His Middle Path Doctrine contested the view that the soul and body were coexistent, independent entities. Instead, Sakyamuni proposed that the fundamental essence of existence lay in-between material and spiritual expressions, although it gave rise to both. He encouraged his followers to adopt Buddhist precepts and meditations as their means for embarking on the right path — a middle path that equally encompassed both mortal and cosmic planes. Thus, they would not be distracted by forces attempting to seduce their mind and body away from the inherent enlightenment in the core of their being. Those who stayed on the the Middle Path of existence received training to strengthen their will and perception so that they would be able to withstand the tempting sideshows along the road — either the lure of earthly attachments or the lure of spiritual detachment. Eventually, with patience they would discover in the center of life's road a golden Reality ironically containing both treasures that humans mistakingly seek along the roadside: sensory fulfillment and spiritual freedom.

The prevailing Brahmanist belief had offered a dual cosmology clearly divided into a spirit world (realm of liberation) and a mortal world (the realm of suffering). In contrast Sakyamuni espoused a single, boundless Reality characterized as a realm of absolute peace (Skt *nirvana*, literally, where the wind doesn't blow). Both spirit and substance, he said, were illusion. True Reality was *nirvana*, where suffering was extinct. He had mastered it by piercing the veil of mortality. Now he would teach the scope, nature and essence of that Reality (Skt *Dharma*) — also, Buddha's Law. Hence, whoever fathomed it, could be free of all encumberances, including rebirth.

Accompanied by his mendicant disciples, the Buddha journeyed on foot across the vast subcontinent of India. Those who traveled with him practiced stringently in pursuit of self-purification and higher stages of consciousness. Sakyamuni did not expect ordinary people to undertake the difficult measures required of monks who aspired to enter *nirvana's* nondescript paradise. Nevertheless, he did not neglect the aspirations of the masses. He provided the people of his time with guidelines for civilized behavior. He influenced the poor and ignorant to reject wanton behavior and have consideration for one another. He raised the consciousness of the secular masses to respect the value of life — a prerequisite to the pursuit of enlightenment.

Sakyamuni encouraged all to embark on a journey across many lifetimes headed toward the attainment of what he had attained. Accordingly, mortal existence encompassed a colossal migration on a cosmic scale. The "journey" represented the continuing transformation of life as a movement from place to place. Those who would board the vehicle of the Buddha's liberating wisdom would be inspired and empowered to cross the field of transmigration successfully.

Brahmanism offered the first rudimentary concept of reincarnation suggesting thereby that a mortal's greater identity was invested in a soul. This indestructible spiritual entity traveled beyond death from one existence to another. Sakyamuni devised an alternative concept. His original Doctine of Transmigration contended that one's temporary mortal manifesation reflected an overarching, everchanging identity — a self that transmigrated through various states. In principle, just as a person changed every moment as he advanced from childhood to old age, a single lifetime was like one moment in the grand scheme of one's epic "journey."

Sakyamuni's Doctrine of Transmigration gave the human condition a purpose. Accordingly, whether aware of it or not, all mortals wished to find their cosmic identity. Unfortunately, it was obfuscated by their mortal distractions. The Buddha taught that transmigration only existed so that mortals may discover the essential enlightenment that constituted the fundamental identity of their existence. Across

a boundless field of space and time, the Buddha conveyed, many buddhas appeared. Throughout past, present and future they have led, lead and will lead mortals onto the right track toward ultimate identity. Sakyamuni contended that he finally had accomplished Perfect Enlightenment due to his eons of service following numerous buddhas. Now that he had become one, the time was ripe for his disciples to start their journey by following him across transmigration until they became buddhas.

Through thousands of allegorical recollections of past existences, Sakyamuni taught that in the course of transmigration to be born a human was rare enough, although it was infinitely more difficult to be born at a time when one could meet a buddha. Consequently, his listeners had been fortunate indeed to be able to board the vehicle of the Buddha's Law in their present lifetime — the golden transport headed for the realm of enlightenment. Since the Buddha's pervasive enlightenment represented the culmination of eons of effort simply duplicating the circumstances of his attainment would not result in their Perfect Enlightenment. To achieve that goal they would have to embark on a long journey requiring a monumental vow to follow him throughout their present lifetime and beyond.

Over the next fifty years his deliberations became increasingly sophisticated. His oral sermons evolved into a profound revelation of the natural laws operating in the universe at a subcognitive level. The Buddha revealed that to see the way all the laws made existence work one had to rise to a higher vantage. Hence, a greater wisdom reflected a taller view and broader scope. The clearest and largest vantage was Perfect Enlightenment. At last, Sakyamuni revealed his view in the *Lotus Sutra*, wherein he exhibited his Perfect Enlightenment. Then, just before his passing he offered a denouement, the *Nirvana Sutra*, as a confirmation of his lofty revelation.

Recorded in two languages, the metaphysically sophisticated *Sanskrit* and the popular vernacular of *Pali*, the so-called 80,000 *sutras* (a symbolic amount referring to the enormity of the collection; not the actual number of *sutras*) reflected the incomprehensible mind of his gifted disciple Ananda (Skt for Bliss). Subsequent to Sakyamuni's death the Order of Buddhist monks charged with the transcription of the *sutras* required the aid of Ananda. From the time he had become Sakyamuni's personal attendant, he was always by the Buddha's side — hearing and witnessing it all. Moreover, as Ananda was blessed with a supernatural memory, he retained every word, circumstance, and nuance of the Buddha's teaching.

Ananda led a council of 500 monks in recording some of the Buddha's works. That event notwithstanding, the great majority of the *sutras* credited to Ananda

reached modern times by the less formal means of oral transmission. The Buddha had left behind a large contingent of devoted practitioners most of whom had taken to the daily recitation of the *sutras* for the sake of their preservation. The names of persons responsible for initially preserving the prose and verses of the *Lotus Sutra*, as well as most of the other *sutras*, either were never recorded or were lost. Hence, when later scribes compiled the *sutras* in written form, the works acquired Ananda's signature phrase "Thus have I heard…" to assure the authenticity of the text. Thus, a genuine, original *sutra* had to state that Ananda experienced it first-hand.

One hundred years later, a second council of 500 succeeded only in further deepening a doctrinal schism that arose between monastic and populist schools of Buddhism. Therefore, nearly two more centuries would pass (c. app. 100 B.C.E.) before the Buddhist canon (Skt *Tripitaka*) acquired a written context organized into: *sutras* (sermons), *vinayas* (rules of discipline), and *shastras* (commentaries).

The canon told of wondrous world-systems scattered throughout an eternity of time and an infinity of space. Typically, each cosmic enclave designated a set of distinct regions inhabited by beings whose state of mind corresponded with the state of their land. For example, hellish regions were populated by beings consumed with hate and violence, while paradisiacal domains were home to the wise, happy and peaceful. In the mythic language of Buddhism, the "realms" strewn throughout the cosmos reflected various states of the human psyche. Accordingly, mortals transmigrated in mind, as well as over numerous lifetimes, across a range of such "world-systems."

While the Buddha sought to awaken humans to the scope of transmigration, his task was hampered by warped perceptions arising from humanity's grand illusion regarding their present circumstance. Living in denial of life's fundamental impermanence, people hungered for possessions and recognition as if they would be theirs forever. Overcome by this stupor foolish mortals embraced nothing more than vapor. Consequently, they suffered loss. Sakyamuni led his disciples to realize the pervasive impermanence of everything so that they may learn to appreciate a greater Reality and their greater identity.

Although his followers included many of the brightest minds in India, they hardly dreamed of grasping the Reality that the Enlightened One envisioned. By conveying the supreme difficulties he overcame in past lives before gaining Perfect Enlightenment, the Buddha ensured that they would appreciate the rarity of his achievement. Sakyamuni encouraged them to strive as he had by continuously applying themselves in ways that best suited them individually. On the road to their

final triumph, he taught, they may be able to achieve a semblance of enlightenment through three kinds of vehicles: (1) the vehicle of Learning (listening to the Buddha), (2) the vehicle of Realization (gaining insight into the Buddha's teachings), and (3) the vehicle of Selflessness (emulating the Buddha's compassion).

The first two of these vehicles led to the enlightenment of a sage (Skt *arhat*) — a state of pure consciousness free of all cravings. Its two types of practitioners were: (1) Receivers of Truth (Skt *sravaka*) — ones who learned by hearing the voice of the Buddha; and, (2) Realizers of Enlightenment (Skt *prateykabuddha*) — practitioners of meditation who related intuitively to the Buddha through contemplation.

While encouraging them to sagehood by increasing their resistance to the lures of impermanence, the Buddha warned repeatedly against spiritual detachment. He cautioned that in an attempt to distance themselves from carnal desire his disciples could inadvertently eradicate the desire for Perfect Enlightenment — an act that would destroy the seed of their ultimate being. His call for a balanced use of these vehicles countered an entrenched idea among religious practitioners in his day — the persistent concept that enlightenment can be achieved through extreme self-effacing practices. While many practitioners of Learning and Realization pursued pure consciousness for the purpose of achieving the extinction of the death-rebirth cycle, the Buddha felt that they were settling for a virtual enlightenment — perhaps in response to the implausibility of reaching Perfect Enlightenment. Therefore, he contended that those who sought extinction from the mortal realm thought only of themselves. He admonished those who pursued *nirvana* motivated only by a self-serving interest — their own liberation from mortality.

The Buddha suggested that they should adopt a compassionate practice devoted to repelling the suffering of all living beings. Those who would adopt the third vehicle of his Law — Selflessness — could achieve a *bodhisattva* enlightenment. Sakyamuni related that he followed this course in prior lives in the service of other buddhas and that such compassionate action illuminated his way to buddhahood. He said that his own enlightenment resulted from his boundless desire to alleviate the sufferings of others and his uncompromising dedication to apply this principle throughout existence. Sakyamuni consistently praised the compassionate activities of those among his followers who adopted the practice of Selflessness. He implied that their dedication to transmit the Buddha's teachings to save all living beings from suffering would lead to Perfect Enlightenment. Still, he held out, even eons worth of selfless efforts cannot guarantee one's ascension to the highest stage of buddhahood. Perfect Enlightenment was virtually impossible to attain.

3
The Lotus Sutra

Over a period of forty-two years Sakyamuni may have expounded thousands of *sutras* in leading his devotees from difficult precepts to follow through difficult concepts to fathom. At this time, just when most had come to believe that they had attained all they would, the Buddha unexpectedly declared that all their lessons to date constituted simply an introduction to the one *sutra* that revealed the essence of his enlightenment. He was now ready to deliver his most profound teaching.

To his listeners this was a shocking announcement. What, they wondered, had the Buddha withheld for all those years? He replied that in the teachings that preceded, he had been guided by his followers' limited capacities to absorb, until they had advanced far enough to comprehend his true purpose. From the start, he had been tactfully and expediently preparing them for the truly profound *sutra*, which he was about to reveal. Bracing his long-devoted followers for the impact of the *Lotus Sutra,* Sakyamuni made a clear and emphatic declaration: "In forty years and more, the truth has not been revealed yet."[2] The Buddha, now 72 years of age, had determined that the time had come for him to deliver his most profound text.

For the next eight years Sakyamuni offered the most formidable of all his theses. The *Lotus Sutra* was the climax of the Buddha's Law. This powerful, mystic treatise full of symbolism, prophecy and revelation painted the largest cosmic scope among all *sutras*. It presented the doctrinal culmination of his entire course, revealed his true identity, and endowed Perfect Enlightenment to future generations.

The stage was set as an assembly of 80,000 of his disciples gathered to hear the first of a three-part treatise — the so-called Threefold *Lotus Sutra* — composed of a preface (the *Sutra of Innumerable Meanings)*, the main body of the text (the *Lotus Sutra)*, and the postscript (the *Sutra of Meditation on Bodhisattva Universal Virtue)*.

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[2] *The Sutra of Innumerable Meanings* (preface of the *Threefold Lotus Sutra*)

The preface began with the assembly in harmonic unison reciting a mysterious stanza describing the ontological identity of the Buddha's body:

His body is neither existing nor nonexistent;
Without cause or condition,
Without a distinguishing self nor of any other distinction;
Neither square nor round,
Neither short nor long;
Neither apparent nor unapparent,
Without birth or death;
Neither created nor emanating,
Neither made nor produced;
Neither sitting nor lying,
Neither walking nor stopping;
Neither moving nor rolling,
Neither calm nor quiet;
Without advance or retreat,
Without safety or danger,
Without right or wrong,
Without merit or demerit;
Neither that nor this,
Neither going nor coming;
Neither blue nor yellow,
Neither red nor white;
Neither crimson nor purple,
Without a variety of color.[3]

These enigmatic qualities described the "Buddha's body" as an absolute state-of-being transcending relative references. The negation of each item in this very broad-based list conveyed the concept that the essential form of the Buddha defied relative notions. The actual identity of the Buddha could not be put into words.

This stanza represented the pinnacle wisdom that Sakyamuni's disciples had achieved to date. It also would serve as a point of departure for the *Lotus Sutra.* Now the Buddha readied himself to take aim at defining the previously indefinable

3 ibid.

"body" of buddhahood. Not since his inaugural *Flower Garden Sutra* — wherein he introduced a new view of the universe — did he introduce any other *sutra* without regard for his audience's ability to comprehend it. The *Lotus Sutra* would reveal the Truth of All Existence, as all the buddhas throughout existence have known it.

The mortal followers who assembled to witness the *Lotus Sutra* were joined by mythic creatures representing the hidden powers and forces of life. Gods and spirit-beings had been introduced in earlier *sutras* as metaphoric representatives who ruled various dimensions of life. This was the largest, most diverse gathering ever summoned to listen to any *sutra*. Over 300,000 mortals and mythic beings convened at the foot of Mount Vulture Peak (a metaphor for the crossroads of life and death) in Central India.

This attentive, ardent congregation watched Sakyamuni as he sat still in a deep meditative trance. Suddenly, a single broad beam of light projected skyward from his forehead. At once it brought into view a vast number of worlds across the universe. The Buddha always projected a beam of light whenever he was about to illuminate an important doctrine. Each time his spotlight fell on a scene symbolic of the subject he was about to illuminate. This time, and for the first time, he brought to light all the worlds in the universe at once — showing therein the variety of existences that living beings were capable of. Like actors on a stage, the inhabitants in each sphere of existence portrayed dramatic vignettes reflecting the nature of their experiential milieu. This metaphysical spectrum of universal living conditions featured scenes ranging from insufferable torture to joyous celebration.

When the audience requested an explanation for this spectacular vision, one of the Buddha's aides and foremost practitioner of Selflessness exclaimed that this particular transcendental illumination was a rare omen. The *bodhisattva* Manjusri, who purportedly had the ability to see into past lives, recalled that an identical sign had been projected by former buddhas whom he witnessed long ago on other worlds. In each of the cases, he said, similar illuminated displays signaled that a buddha was ready to reveal the *Lotus Sutra*, the ultimate teaching of all buddhas throughout time and universe — the teaching that revealed:

> *The Truth of the Reality of All Existence.*[4]

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[4] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 1 - Introduction.

Sakyamuni arose from his meditation and addressed the assembly. For the first time among all the *sutras*, he refrained from the tradition of speaking only in response to a question. Sakyamuni spoke out directly as follows:

> *The wisdom of buddhas is very profound and infinite...Difficult to understand and difficult to enter...countless buddhas have been in fellowship, perfectly practicing the infinite Law of all buddhas, perfecting the very profound, unprecedented Reality and preaching, as opportunity served, its meaning (so) difficult to understand.*[5]

The brightest among his disciples, Sariputra, implored the Buddha to speak further on this "Law of all buddhas," but the Declarer of Truth (Skt *Tathagata*) declined to continue, because of the presence in the audience of many who believed that through the Buddha's earlier teachings they had gained entry into *nirvana*. Some 5,000 monks (Skt *arhat*) who achieved the spiritual contentment of a pure consciousness had lost the desire to aspire further. They quickly admitted to his admonition, but devoid of the desire for Perfect Enlightenment, they felt obliged to excuse themselves and withdrew from the assembly.

Thus, even before the Buddha began to elucidate his revelations, the opening segment of the *Lotus Sutra* cautioned against the insidious ego — allowing that even those who attain spiritual emancipation may fall victim to inherent darkness. In achieving the state of detachment, these *arhats* had fallen under the misconception that they had already reached enlightenment. They had lost the link to all desire, including the desire for buddhahood. Therefore, they saw no reason to stay.

This episode ended a long-running contention. For decades the Buddha had continually warned that whoever aspired to spiritual detachment from all desires might as well be severing his own head from his body. Those who did not heed his warnings had achieved emancipation at a steep price. Unfortunately, once the *Lotus Sutra* commenced, they were no longer able to listen, because they had burned out their desire for Perfect Enlightenment. They had become the "unreceptives" (Skt. *icchantika*) — those who severed the roots of receptivity for buddhahood.

Even the fatherly compassion of the Buddha could not save the "unreceptives" from themselves. No matter how patient and caring an effort the Buddha may have made in leading these individuals, ultimately, the completion of their journey

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[5] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 2 - Tactfulness

depended on the choices they had made. Their decision to ignore his warnings absolved him of responsibility for their misfortune. Nevertheless, he would not abandon them as his compassion for them was that of a father for his children.

In preventing those with closed minds from hearing this one sutra the Buddha conveyed right at the outset of this gathering that the Lotus Sutra contained his final word on the "infinite Law of All Buddhas." — a matter of such seriousness that one should not hear it if one was not prepared to accept its veracity. The tale of the "unreceptive saints" *[icchantika arhats]* who had lost their desire for Perfect Enlightenment constituted his warning for the ages: without cultivating one's desire to know the Truth of the Reality of All Existence one would not be able to hear it. This reminder posted at the threshold of the *sutra* implied that only those ready to embrace Perfect Enlightenment should enter the realm of this *sutra.*

Those who were neither ready nor willing to inherit the wealth of the Buddha's ultimate wisdom constituted people who believed that they had attained what they had not attained. As these people were not be able to value the treasure he was about to bequeath to them, they represented human beings who on the path of spiritual pursuit had lost their lost way — their minds so warped by insularity and detachment that they falsly believed in their own spiritual attainment, and, as such, arrogantly held the view that they no longer needed to pursue it.

This episode suggested that human beings were accountable for their thoughts, words and actions, particularly when the issues involved their decisions to trust the Buddha, as well as vow their commitment to follow his direction. Those who heard the Buddha's words either were of a mind to listen and accept or to turn a deaf ear, and in so doing reject his Truth. This point was akin to the adage that a horse can be led to water but can't be made to drink it. Thus, the *sutra* acknowledged that to be ready to hear the Buddha's Law (Skt *Dharma)* of Perfect Enlightenment one must be ready to accept it — even before hearing its content. Otherwise, one would be better served to wait for a later time.

In accepting the departure of the "unreceptive" the Buddha prevented them from defiling his most excellent teachings — a deed that would have compounded their lost state-of-being and severely delayed their next opportunity to hear it. Nevertheless, as the *Lotus Sutra* offered unqualified universal salvation, their departure foreshadowed a future time when they would be given another chance to hear it. In a later chapter of the *sutra* the Buddha alluded to a future Age [corresponding with the present time] characterized by "unreceptive" people for whom the *Lotus Sutra* would become their direct vehicle into Perfect Enlightenment.

4
The Treasure Tower

As the *Lotus Sutra* commenced, Sakyamuni suddenly nullified the three vehicle system — the lengthy paths to enlightenment pursued by his disciples. In its place the Buddha introduced a major conceptual shift in defining enlightenment and its attainment. He announced that enlightenment is perfection, and as such it could only be of one form; and, furthermore, he surprised his listeners, all those who were present to hear this sutra would achieve Perfect Enlightenment. With gaping mouths they wondered how this could be possible.

The *Lotus Sutra* introduced the concept of a universally accessible Perfect Enlightenment by posing three new integrated principles:

1 ***The condition of buddhahood secretly resided in all living beings, without exception.*** The *Lotus Sutra* expanded the use of the word "buddha" beyond its context as an honorary title. Traditionally, the Enlightened One (i.e., Sakyamuni Buddha) referred to a person who achieved Perfect Enlightenment. Heretofore, the "Enlightened One" identified a fundamentally enlightened identity of Life (i.e., buddha-nature) operating inside the scope of human nature. Although humans were unaware of its existence, all possessed an enlightened core that glowed beneath the vicissitudes of their mortal experience. In the *Lotus Sutra* this primal essence of Life became synonymous with the buddha-identity. Hence, the Buddha's advanced spiritual perfection embodied Life's fundamentally enlightened identity — symbolized by the Lotus flower. The splendid bearing of Sakyamuni represented the blossom-aspect of the enlightened-nature. He exhibited its fruition through his boundless wisdom and majestic appearance. Ordinary living beings represented the seed-aspect of the enlightened identity — the potential of Perfect Enlightenment —

in a dormant state. According to the *Lotus Sutra*, the buddha-seed existed universally within all human beings, without exceptions, due to personality, intelligence, class, gender, moral standards, or any other reason.

Although its doctrine of primal equanimity projected a cosmic perspective, the *Lotus Sutra* aimed at earthly relevance. For example, in Sakyamuni's time, this egalitarian pronouncement constituted a challenge to the prevailing institutional inequity enforced in India through the Brahmins-dominated caste system — a deeply-rooted, hierarchical social structure built on the premise of an incarnate inequity — wherein one's lifelong social class was predetermined by the station of one's birth.

The *Lotus Sutra's* consummate principle of universal equanimity, although still unrealized in today's world, may have been the first and most ancient call for an egalitarian view of the human race. In teaching humanity to respect the seed of Perfect Enlightenment inherent in every mortal the Buddha sought to obviate all acts of human degradation and encouraged the highest mutual regard for all living beings based on the unlimited scope of human potential.

2 ***The real world was a place of happiness or suffering solely depending upon the life condition of the person.*** According to the *Lotus Sutra*, buddhahood can surface anywhere in mortal existence. Consequently, any individual can transform his personal world into a buddha's land — a sphere of existence where happiness reigned. This new concept challenged the cosmic determinism of the Indic creed. It regarded the earthly domain as a sinful realm where humans and animals were destined to endure and suffer the consequences of their desires. Accordingly, only those who rejected all desires could be liberated from their earthbound cycle of rebirth.

The *Lotus Sutra* constituted a fundamental shift away from this principle. It regarded the world as a reflection of its inhabitants. Therefore, it was a land of suffering, when inhabited by sufferers. Conversely, it could be a land of enlightenment, if occupied by enlightened beings. The *Lotus Sutra* defined the "buddha-land of Perfect Enlightenment" as the here-and-now when illuminated by a

Perfectly Enlightened being's mind, body, senses, desires and circumstances. Through the doctrine that beings and environments mirrored each other, the *sutra* admonished those who would seek extinction from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Rather, the Buddha conveyed that the goal of a human being should be to wish for rebirth until he successfully transformed his mortal land into a buddha-land. The alternative plan — detachment — represented an abandonment of mortal existence to suffering. Therefore, in the eyes of the *Lotus Sutra,* seeking extinction from rebirth equated with the abandonment of future generations. Herewith, Sakyamuni called for a new outlook. He recommended that humanity refocus on self-transformation rather than spiritual relocation. Thus, he presented mortal existence as an opportunity for enlightenment and invested transmigration with a noble goal. From that vantage, the suffering endured from one generation to the next turned into the challenge humanity had to overcome in creating the immeasurable value of a buddha-land within the mortal dimension — a heaven on earth.

3 ***The Lotus Sutra itself embodied the secret means for actualizing enlightenment — the "One direct vehicle of buddhahood" with which all buddhas revealed their true selves.*** The Sanskrit word *dharma* referred to the Truth, Cosmology, Laws and Reality of All Existence. The *dharma* included everything, whether a phenomenon of Nature, a thought, a feeling or some indefinable existence that transcended time and space. The Buddha's *Dharma* (i.e., "Buddha's Law" or "infinite Law of all buddhas") centered on the cosmic Law of Cause and Effect. Accordingly, Cause and Effect was the source of all natural laws, as well as the regulator of transmigration. This Law was embedded in Nature — its essence, expressions and scope. In addition, it represented the core of the *Dharma* of the *Lotus Sutra*. The Buddha characterized the *Lotus-dharma* as the embodiment of the blossom and seed of Perfect Enlightenment — simultaneously exhibiting the fruition of buddhahood and the "One direct vehicle of buddhahood." In order to confirm this Truth, Sakyamuni invited countless buddhas from throughout the universe to bear witness to the revelation of his Perfect Enlightenment and testify to the verity

> of his contention that this *sutra* contained its cause. His enlightened guests concurred unanimously that the *Lotus Sutra* embodied the source of Perfect Enlightenment and the Truth of all existence.

Sakyamuni taught his *Dharma* — the Truth, Law, Reality and Cosmology of All Existence — from the inception of his enlightenment. As his course progressed, the *Dharma* unfolded in stages. Moreover, as the scope of his cosmology expanded, the capacity of his followers to envision the greater reality of Life grew proportionately. At first, like children, they needed a code of human values and rules of behavior to follow. In time, they grasped sophisticated metaphysical concepts that explained the laws of Nature and the subconscious works of the mind. The *Dharma* grew in depth and breadth until its eventual climax in the *Lotus Sutra* whose stated mission was to reveal the "Truth of the Reality of All Existence." After over forty years of building up to it the time had come to reveal the full scope and absolute essence of the buddha's most wonderful *Dharma*.

Sakyamuni used several laudatory synonyms in referring to the unprecedented *Dharma* hidden in the *Lotus Sutra*. In preparing his listeners for the unique Reality about to be revealed to them, the Buddha repeatedly alluded to the *Dharma* of the *Lotus Sutra* using the grandest possible terms: "Mystic *Dharma*; Wonderful *Dharma*; *Dharma* of all Buddhas; Perfectly Endowed *Dharma*; Supreme *Dharma*." Through this string of exaltations, Sakyamuni deliberately drew a vivid distinction between the value of the *Dharma* that he had conveyed in earlier *sutras* and the final Reality to be elucidated in the *Lotus Sutra*. The heralded synonyms he had reserved for the *Lotus-dharma* confirmed that this particular *sutra* specifically contained the Truth of the Reality of All Existence. To ensure that this differentiation would not be missed, the Buddha declared that the *Lotus-dharma* constituted the "One direct vehicle of Perfect Enlightenment." He characterized his previous *sutras* as indirect vehicles — as progress was achieved therein in stages. Hence, in the final analysis they could not be used to enter Perfect Enlightenment.

At the start of his course Sakyamuni offered this caveat: there existed no way to access Perfect Enlightenment from a stage below it, as only one who was already a buddha could fathom the Buddha-state. Consequently, disciples could at best only hope to achieve an enlightened state of Learning, Realization and Selflessness. With his revelation that a direct vehicle — the primal cause of Perfect Enlightenment — existed within the *Lotus-dharma,* he obviated the need to settle for anything less.

His introduction of the "One direct vehicle" began as soon as the detached ones

exited. Turning his attention to those who were open to discover the Truth of the Reality of All Existence, he exclaimed that the Buddha's appearance in the world was due to his desire to share the vehicle of Perfect Enlightenment. Sakyamuni explained that its revelation had been his purpose from the very start:

> *Such a wonderful Law as this is [only] preached by the Perfectly Enlightened Declarers of Truth (Skt buddha-tathagatas) on [rare] occasions...Because the buddhas, the world-honored ones, desire to cause all living beings to open [their eyes] to the Buddha-knowledge so that they may gain the pure [mind, therefore] they appear in the world; because they desire to show all living beings the Buddha-knowledge, they appear in the world; because they desire to cause all living beings to apprehend the Buddha-knowledge, they appear in the world; because they desire to cause all living beings to enter the way of the Buddha-knowledge, they appear in the world... Whatever they do is always for one purpose, that is, to take the Buddha-knowledge and reveal it to all living beings...The Declarer of Truth, by means of the One buddha-vehicle preaches to all living beings the Law; there is no other vehicle, neither a second nor a third.*[6]

The word "one" as used in the "One buddha-vehicle" denoted the all-inclusive embrace of the *Lotus Sutra*, rather than any exclusivity or estoricism. It referred to "one vehicle" that all mortal beings, without exception, may invoke in accessing Perfect Enlightenment. To impress upon the assembled that this *sutra* constituted the universal vehicle used by all buddhas, Sakyamuni prophesied the buddhahood of his major disciples and specified the time and place of their future advents. Next, he predicted forthcoming buddhahood for tens, then hundreds of others. He went on to declare that anyone attending the *Lotus Sutra* would become a buddha. Thus, he had endowed all those present with a gift none had expected. Awestruck by the magnitude of his compassion for each of them, his disciples realized that they would "receive (buddhahood) without seeking it."[7]

The apparent disparity between this *sutra* and his earlier teachings astonished Sakyamuni's disciples. Suddenly, by virtue of the *Dharma* of buddha-endowment: (a) proponents of the two vehicles of Learning and Realization, having spared no

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[6] ibid.

[7] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 4 - Faith Discernment

effort in aspiring for a limited enlightenment, were to receive the unattainable — Perfect Enlightenment — for no reason other than that they showed up with faith in the Buddha; and (b) practitioners of the third vehicle, Selflessness, unexpectedly found that they skipped an interminable step-by-step climb over eons of lifetimes. To their amazement, the Buddha assured this gathering that they were to inherit a boundless, indestructible joy equal to his own. Nevertheless, he expressed concern that his earlier statements — herein superceded — regarding the inaccessibility of Perfect Enlightenment may be misconstrued as contradictory and false.

So that none may be tempted to slander the Buddha as a liar, he explained that along the course of his teaching, he tactfully employed an expedient strategy (Skt *upaya*) dictated by the limited capacity of his audience to absorb the enlightened visage. The *Lotus Sutra*, however, transcended tact and expediency, as it was the teaching of universal endowment, not special attainment. Consequently, his course to date was true, as far as showing them what they could attain, but in regards to the unlimited scope of his *Dharma* the three vehicles were useless. Now, they must shed the only vehicles they knew and accept on faith Sakyamuni's assurance that Perfect Enlightenment was at hand. They must trust the *Lotus-dharma* to take them beyond the range of their imagination to the Reality of Perfect Enlightenment.

Suddenly, the Buddha transformed the landscape by switching off the field of relativity and clearing away all the planets and stars in the universe. Thus he prepared a transcendent space — an "Air" of pure wisdom. The assembly found itself transported into a luminous boundless realm. This was the Buddha's land — called the Land of Tranquil Light; a place that was simultaneously here-and-now, as well as everywhere-and-forever. The Buddha had signaled the commencement of a surreal Ceremony in the Air — an ebullient gathering held in a metaphysical wonderland beyond the bounds of consciousness or dreams. The revelation of the *Lotus-dharma* had commenced in glorious metaphor.

Sakyamuni's followers watched in awe as a miles-high monolith appeared in the Air. This ornate and bejeweled towering structure represented the repository of Perfect Enlightenment. The Tower floating in the sky was adorned with seven kinds of jewels. When its mammoth doors opened they revealed the seated apparition of an extinct buddha named Abundant Treasures — a ghostly figure whose sacred body was made of sheer wisdom "Excellent! Excellent! All that you say is true,"[8]

[8] *Lotus Sutra,* Chapter 11 - Beholding the Precious Stupa

Abundant Treasures exclaimed as he invited Sakyamuni to share the "lion-throne" (i.e., seat of enlightenment) he occupied high inside the lofty tower. This buddha had made a vow in an unfathomable distant past always to reappear within the confines of the Treasure Tower wherever and whenever the *Lotus Sutra* was recited by any buddha. Forever after he would bear witness and confirm its validity.

Once seated in the Treasure Tower, Sakyamuni summoned millions of buddhas from the "ten directions of the universe" (the eight points of the compass plus up and down) — buddhas as radiant as himself, but whom the Buddha described as emanations of himself. Each arriving with an entourage of celestial *bodhisattvas*, all the buddhas reclined on lion-thrones placed beneath the shade of jewel-bearing trees. Once all had settled, the buddhas together with Sakyamuni extended their "long broad tongues" across the ten directions — illustrating that the greatest truth tellers in the universe concurred that this *sutra* defined the Truth of all truths. The length and breadth of their tongues dramatized the infinite scope of their virtue in a mythic vision that constituted an incomparable testament. Their concurrent seal of approval on all that was said in the *Lotus Sutra* validated Sakyamuni's contention that among all the truths ever preached the *Lotus-dharma* was the ultimate Truth — acknowledged by all the buddhas as their one source of Perfect Enlightenment.

In the first half of the 28-chapter *Lotus Sutra* the proceedings started with an assembly composed of mortal beings and closed with an assembly of buddhas. The transformation indicated that the *sutra* had moved from one side of the road, the world of mortality, to the middle of the road — Perfect Enlightenment.

The first half (Chapters 1 - 14) of the *Lotus Sutra* proposed that:

- all buddhas throughout past, present and future shared one common Perfect Enlightenment, and were committed to lead all beings to it.
- the *Lotus Sutra* was the pinnacle teaching practiced by all buddhas and they concurred that it had been the source of their buddhahood.
- all mortals, without exception, were endowed inherently with the seed of Perfect Enlightenment, therefore it could be accessed.
- the "One direct vehicle of Perfect Enlightenment" embodied in the *Lotus Sutra* had the power to raise the Treasure Tower of buddha-wisdom, while the three indirect vehicles could never raise it.
- the Buddha was able to convert the mortal world into the Land of Tranquil Light. With this act he showed that the vehicle of Perfect Enlightenment transformed any state-of-being (i.e., land of enduring suffering) into the realm of enlightened joy (i.e., buddha-land).

5
Rising from Beneath the Surface

As the Ceremony in the Air continued, the process of self-transformation introduced in the first half of the *Lotus Sutra* gave way to the profound revelations of the Buddha's "true body" described in the middle section of the text.

From his "lion-throne" in the "Treasure Tower of the Seven Jewels," Sakyamuni proclaimed that the "Truth of the Reality of All Existence" embedded in the *Lotus Sutra* constituted a formidable medicine prepared for the sake of future generations. He predicted that this elixir would become essential more than 2,000 years after his own passing — in an age decayed by dementia, detachment, treachery, vilification, and misperceptions. By this time, Sakyamuni said, as his own teachings would have become distorted and their powers will have dissipated, a "preacher" of exceptional virtue will appear. He will espouse the curative powers of the *Lotus Sutra*.

The future champion of the *Lotus Sutra* will encounter resistance from various kinds of powerful men of high civil and religious ranking. The intense difficulties heaped upon him would be greater than ordinary humans can endure, yet he will not rest in his valiant effort to propagate the Perfectly Endowed Law. Eventually, people of this distant era will discover that indeed this *sutra* can cure their ills by granting to all its universally illuminating power. The Buddha asked the assembled, "who amongst you would be able to carry out this future mission as messengers of the *Lotus Sutra*?" Caught up in the excitement of the ceremony, Sakyamuni's earthly disciples enthusiastically expressed the wish to be reborn as its proponents in the forthcoming age. While acknowledging their good intentions, the Buddha gently dismissed their offer. Instead, he revealed, he knew of beings who were ideally suited to undertake the task and bear the difficulties ahead.

Suddenly, upon his signal, the sky filled with the approach of a great multitude — a sight never witnessed or mentioned before in any other *sutra*. An innumerable quantity of illuminated beings sprang in legions from "the space below the earth"

and assembled in the air around the Treasure Tower. So many of them appeared that, indeed, it took fifty eons for their full number to congregate. Yet as this event took place outside the realm of real time, it may as well have been half a day.

Four leaders at the forefront of this awesome mobilization radiated enlightened virtue. Their names reflected the exceptional noble bearing they exuded, as follows: Demeanor of Supreme Essence, Demeanor of Purity, Demeanor of Boundlessness, and Demeanor of Steadfast Happiness. They greeted all the seated buddhas — Sakyamuni, Abundant Treasures, and the Buddhas who emanated from the Ten Directions — like old friends who had not seen each other for some time. They inquired about the Buddha's health and expressed their wish for his continuing well-being. After he cheerfully acknowledged their greetings, they formally pledged to him that they will transmit the *Lotus Sutra* when the time to do so ripened.

Surprisingly, those who sprang from beneath the surface issued an ageless and sage appearance that relatively dwarfed the otherwise incomparable demeanor of Sakyamuni. It appeared as if he were a child standing next to one-hundred-year-old men. Asked about this peculiarity, the Buddha conveyed that these illuminated beings were inconceivably ancient, perfectly-evolved, enlightened beings of eternal origin. Although they had achieved Perfect Enlightenment, these selfless beings volunteered to forgo its manifestation. Rather, they preferred to reappear in the mortal realm and work on behalf of the Buddha's Supreme Law. They volunteered to be born in the future as mortal beings so that they may show the way by their example. Proudly, the Buddha held that these Selfless Volunteers (Skt *bodhisattva-mahasattvas)* were his original disciples from before the inception of time.

The assembly of mortal listeners seemed confounded by the contradictory chronology before them. How could it be that Sakyamuni was the original teacher of these extraordinarily venerable eternally ancient beings? The Sakyamuni they knew had attained his enlightenment for the first time at the age of thirty, when he meditated under the tree at *Gaya*. How then could he have been the teacher of so many enlightened beings from so long ago? In reply to this question, Sakyamuni explained that his awakening to buddhahood at that time constituted an expedient, intermediate teaching now overshadowed by the real scope of his cosmic identity. In actuality, he declared, his origin as the Buddha preceded the beginning of time.

The voice with which the Buddha spoke from this juncture of the *sutra* no longer represented the earthly Sakyamuni — the mortal form of the Buddha. Rather, the real speaker in the sixteenth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* was the cosmic body of Perfect Enlightenment — representing Life's immortal identity. The transformed

Buddha embodied the manifestation of Everlasting Life, proving that the source of buddhahood existed within the mortal being. Hence, the mortal-born Sakyamuni had been eclipsed by a greater identity. Sakyamuni, the Declarer of Truth (Skt *Tathagata*), had become the ultimate personification of Perfect Enlightenment — the Declarer of the Truth of Everlasting Life.

> *(To him) there is neither birth nor death, neither going away nor coming forth; neither living nor dead; neither reality nor unreality; neither this nor that.*[9]

In equating Perfect Enlightenment with Everlasting Life, the *Lotus Sutra* declared that the fundamental identity, nature and scope of every phenomenon in existence was everlasting. Accordingly, the Reality of All Existence was omnipresent and of everlasting scope. The *Lotus Sutra* revealed that this immortal Reality infused every temporal phenomenon between birth and death across time and space.

By declaring it to be an immortal identity hidden within all mortals below the surface of cognition, the *sutra* equated the ultimate state of mortal being with the pure state of Everlasting Life. Thus, for the first time, Perfect Enlightenment had been defined as a state-of-being that could appear or disappear, rise to the surface or recede into oblivion. The idea of a dynamic Perfect Enlightenment was illustrated by the Buddha, when he said[10] that he had been appearing and disappearing in and out of the mortal realm forever, according to the need and the time for teaching the way of enlightenment. As Everlasting Life also constituted the essential identity of all mortal beings, its appearances denoted the actuation of Perfect Enlightenment. Thus, the *sutra* declared, the eternal Truth within humans will transform the world.

The *Lotus Sutra* personified an inevitable arising of Perfect Enlightenment among mortal beings through the example of the Selfless Volunteers. It portended that the *bodhisattva-mahasattvas* would be born as future humans bearing the sinister poisons of envy, greed, selfishness, ignorance and other virulent dysfunctions infecting the human condition. In a forthcoming age beset by confusion and conflict they would call upon their secret immortal-nature to emerge above the mire of mortal existence and in so doing defeat these sufferings. Accordingly, people will be able to evoke the eternal healing power from below the surface of their mortality and use it to illuminate the inherently immortal identity they owned before birth.

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[9] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 16 - Revelation of the [Eternal] Life of the Tathagata
[10] ibid.

The "ground" these volunteers sprang through symbolized the earthly desires of living beings. The "space beneath the surface" defined the dimension of eternal, infinite, pure enlightenment that they originated from. Therefore, the arrival of the illuminated volunteers represented humanity's universal secret desire to raise the Perfectly Enlightened identity of Life upon the mortal dimension. The *Lotus Sutra* declared therein that the immortal source of wisdom and joy may be resurrected through the ground of mortal desires. Its potential arising meant that the seed of an Everlasting Reality was present below the surface of mortal experience. The names of the four noble luminaries at the helm of the legion of Selfless Volunteers symbolized the four enlightened attributes of the Buddha's everlasting identity — Eternal Essence, Boundless Scope, Absolute Purity and Indestructible Joyfulness.

Through the metaphor of the Selfless Volunteers the Buddha prophesied that in the distant future human beings would use the *Lotus Sutra* to revive their original identity — represented by the attributes of Perfect Enlightenment. At that time some will recognize the *sutra's* merits immediately, while others will find its value difficult to discern. Those who embraced the profound essence of Everlasting Life will be able to resurrect its inherent luminosity. They will use its power to heal themselves of the virulent forces of ignorance plaguing the human mind. However, these will be selfless beings who will not be satisfied only with personal triumphs. They will work fervently to help others find the boundless joy inherent within all mortals. Eventually, as the legacy of Perfect Enlightenment surfaced humans will regain their original eternal identity and peace will abound throughout.

The *Lotus Sutra* illustrated this cosmic prophecy through a metaphoric parable told by the Buddha about a "Physician and His Poisoned Children:"

> *Once, while a good Physician was away caring for the sick in another land, his children inadvertently swallowed some expired, spoiled medicine that had turned toxic. It caused them to lose their minds. Upon his return, their father attempted to give them an antidote for the poison that now flowed in their bloodstream. Some swallowed it and quickly recovered; Other children, caught in the grip of illusion, refused the medicine — believing that they were well and that the antidote was poisonous. To persuade all his children to accept the cure, their Father departed again for a foreign land, and from there sent a messenger to declare that he had died. Hearing this news, those tainted by hallucinations were seized by grief and remorse for not heeding their Father when he was still alive and ingested the antidote he left behind.*

> *After they recovered their senses, the Physician returned home to reveal that he never died. Seeing him alive, his children experienced infinite joy.*[11]

From a mythic perspective, this allegory represented mortal beings as children of Everlasting Life (Father). Their dementia illustrated the illusion that birth and death constituted the beginning and end of their being. These pure eternal beings lost their memory of their eternal origin and fell to suffering from the poison of mortality. The parable equated cognitive mortal reality with warped illusions, and the cosmic mind preceding mortality with primal innocence. The insanity that the children contracted (i.e., mortal suffering) forced the original mind to recede under the surface of reality. Consequently, all mortal beings possessed a subconscious desire to return to the immortal, enlightened identity that they originated from.

This parable constituted a prophecy. It stated that having ingested the poison of mortal ignorance human beings will follow one of two paths: a discerning few in whom the poison had not taken over completely still will recognize their Father when they see him and accept the antidote he left behind (i.e., have faith in the Declarer of the Truth of Everlasting Life and trust his prescription); many others will refuse the medicine.

The former denoted people who felt mystically connected to the *Lotus Sutra.* If in any lifetime they heard of it, subconsciously they would "recall" their attendance at the assembly. The latter referred to people who would reject the *sutra* when they encountered it. They were represented by the grieving children who believed that their father had died. This meant that after Sakyamuni's passing, many humans will feel a gnawing sense of abandonment, loneliness and loss of direction. They will live in a world of endless hardships and continuing sorrows. Eventually, exhausted by their misfortunes and finding no other recourse, they will turn in desperation to ingest the antidote the Buddha left behind. Suddenly, as they discover that they have been cured by this good medicine, they will be able to see the Buddha again.

The return of the Father-Healer once all his children were cured symbolized the transformation of mortal delusion and confusion into the manifestation of eternal joy. His second coming predicted the return of Perfect Enlightenment at a future time when mortals will embrace the original state of immortal illumination from which they arose. In depicting the Buddha as the immortal Father of all mortals and mortal beings as the eternal children who lost their senses, the parable offered that

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11 ibid. (condensed version)

the source (parent) of All Existence was Everlasting Life. As the Physician-Father, the Buddha — often heralded as the Declarer of Truth (Skt *Tathagata*) — portrayed the Declarer of the Truth of Everlasting Life. The medicine he offered was the Truth of Everlasting Life embedded in the *Lotus-dharma*. The ability of the cured children to see the Buddha again denoted that from the vantage of the *Lotus Sutra* all will see Perfect Enlightenment once more. Thus, the parable equated the Declarer of the Truth of Everlasting Life with the primal omnipresence of eternally enlightened Life. As parent and healer of all mortals, it vested in him the will of the cosmos to seek forever to restore all mortal beings to their original state with the elixir of Perfect Enlightenment:

> *Thus it is, since I became Buddha in the very far distant past, [that my] life is of infinite (eon), forever existing and immortal...(And yet that which) I attained by pursuing the way of Selflessness is not even yet accomplished but will still be twice the previous number (of eon)...the appearance of the buddhas in the world is a rare occurrence...All living beings, must realize the difficulty of meeting a buddha and cherish a longing and a thirst for him; then will they cultivate the roots of goodness. Hence, the Declarer of Truth, though he does not in reality become extinct, announces [his] extinction.*[12]

As Sakyamuni's disciples witnessed this unprecedented revelation, they grasped the boundless compassion of the Declarer of the Truth of Everlasting Life for all and abandoned any remaining doubt or delusion. They realized immediately that the Buddha had transported them to the Land of Tranquil Light so that they may be freed of all worries about life and death.

Having accomplished this goal for the sake of those who had followed him throughout India, Sakyamuni then turned his attention to the future of Buddhism — setting his sights on a time thousands of years following his physical extinction. He spoke at length about the immeasurable merits to be gained by those who would perpetuate the *Lotus Sutra* when the time comes. Accordingly, a treasure of blessings would befall those who would "teach the excellent Law" and "erect [its] sanctuary" in their lives (i.e., proof of enlightenment). These persons would find that in revealing the Reality of All Existence their "happiness will be infinite." The Buddha stated that such future devotees should erect a sanctuary of veneration

[12] ibid.

wherever they abide. Whatever their state-of-being, Perfect Enlightenment will mirror in their lives as they appreciate its endowment:

> *Wherever (this person) dwells and stays,*
> *Walks, sits, or lies,*
> *Or preaches but a stanza [of this sutra],*
> *In that place erect a sanctuary,*
> *Adorn it and make it beautiful,*
> *And in all ways pay homage to it.*
> *When Buddha-sons and -daughters dwell in such a place,*
> *It means that the Buddha himself uses it*
> *And ever abides in it,*
> *Walking, or sitting, or lying down.*[13]

Thus, while sealing his promise to abide in humanity for all time, the Declarer of the Truth of Everlasting Life turned to face Demeanor of Supreme Essence (Skt *Visishtaciritra*), foremost representative among the four noble luminaries heading the assembly of Selfless Volunteers. The Buddha entrusted the ageless Supreme Essence with the future propagation of the *Lotus Sutra*. In a ritual imitating the regenerative power of Nature, Sakyamuni, having personified through his speech the eternal blossoming of Perfect Enlightenment, extended the mission to the Declarer of the Truth who would personify the seed of Everlasting Life by virtue of his action.

> *This rare Law of Perfect Enlightenment. Now I entrust it to you...If good sons or good daughters in ages to come believe in the Declarer of the Truth's wisdom do proclaim this Law-Flower Sutra to them that they may hear and know it, in order that they may obtain the Buddha-wisdom.*[14]

Following these final words Sakyamuni restored his earthly identity. The lofty Treasure Tower and its guests instantly returned from where they came. Thus, the Ceremony in the Air closed as suddenly as it appeared. The initial assembly found itself back in India at the foothills of Mount Vulture Peak. Sakyamuni, once again in his earthbound body, praised those who will embrace "The Truth of the Reality

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[13] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 17 - Discrimination of Merits
[14] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 21 - The Final Commission

of All Existence" in the future. The bounty of merits enjoyed by the faithful would include steadfast happiness, the enlightenment of their senses, good fortune, peace, harmony and the protection of favorable heavenly forces. In the closing portion of the *sutra*, the Buddha received pledges from powerful deities — representing forces universally inherent in life — promising to protect future believers who embraced the *Lotus-dharma* so that they need never be bothered by fear. In addition, the finest angelic *bodhisattvas* came forth from throughout the universe and vowed to come to the aid of any believers who would ever call upon this *sutra* for help.

The start of the *Lotus Sutra* addressed a varied audience of mortal beings. Its mid-section invited enlightened beings to gather in the Land of Tranquil Light — metaphor for Perfect Enlightenment. Its closing chapters dealt with an assembly of heavenly powers vowing eternal allegiance to this *sutra*. The arc formed by the three sections simulated the Middle Path Doctrine that the Buddha had taught at the inception of his course. Thus the *sutra's* structure confirmed that the ultimate Truth of All Existence was a golden mean — rising between mortal (i.e., material, temporary, limited) and spiritual (i.e., formless, universal, free) realities, although it encompassed both. Hence, while Perfect Enlightenment arose from a fountainhead in the middle of the *sutra's* text, it singularly engulfed all of life to the extreme.

Three months after concluding his pinnacle teaching, Sakyamuni announced that the time for his physical extinction had come. In preparation for that moment, at age 80, the Buddha dictated his last will and testament known as the *Nirvana Sutra*. In it he said that he left his true intention for future generations but cautioned all to be wary of the contamination of the legacy he so painstakingly endowed:

> *Rely on the Law, and not upon persons.*
> *Rely on the meaning [of the teachings] and not upon the words.*
> *Rely on wisdom and not upon discriminating thinking.*
> *Rely on sutras that are complete and final*
> *and not on those that are not complete and final.*[15]

Following his lucid final words, bequeathed to a future yet-to-be, Sakyamuni peacefully departed this world while resting in a grove of fragrant trees.

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[15] *Nirvana Sutra*, Volume 6

6
Streams

Placing Sakyamuni's bones and relics, as he had wished, in memorial mounds dispersed among the regions of India symbolized the Buddha's eternal proximity and accessibility to all. For the disciples he left behind, his passing marked the dawn of a new era. The time had come to foster the teachings that the Enlightened One had left for future generations. Now that their teacher had departed the inheritors of the Buddhist Order (Skt *Sangha*) had to decide how to teach Buddhism to those who had never met him. Leading monks opted to start the teaching of his *Dharma* with basic, simple concepts, such as the code of behavior that the Buddha had called for at the beginning of his course. His precepts had been tailored to inspire in people a preference for goodness — characterized as a noble path that in due course would free one from the cosmic shackles of suffering forged over lifetimes of ignorant or evil choices. Therefore, in its initial thrust the new Order stressed positive behavior as the first step on the road to enlightenment.

To cultivate among the populace a sacred reverence for the Buddha's teachings, leaders of the Order declared that he had been the ultimate personification of the universe's wisdom — Thus Come One (Pali *Tathata*) — who on very rare occasions made his appearance in the world of form to show mortal beings the noble path to salvation. They declared that from the moment of his birth to the Gautama royal family Siddhartha had carried within him the secret of his destiny. Compelled by his great compassion for mortal beings the Buddha chose to make his advent in this world, although long ago he had overcome any compelling reason for birth. Thus, they observed, he had come to deliver human beings out of the desert of suffering through which they wandered aimlessly. First, he had to make people aware that they were lost in a barren wilderness of illusions. Next, he taught that fulfillment and clarity awaited whoever embarked on the challenging path ahead — the road of aspiration that led in due course to the promised land of eternal joy (Skt *nirvana*).

In the eyes of those he left behind, the Buddha was the spiritual father of all the living for all time. The teaching he willed to his children — ensuing generations of believers — was a vehicle that they may use to find their way to the safe side of existence. They regarded the *Dharma* as a treasure that showed the way in which all may advance valiantly toward the highest spiritual plane and eventually rejoin their eternal parent. Those with pure hearts who had the good fortune to see and hear the Buddha received his words as a parental directive bequeathed to all. The pure-minded seekers who followed Sakyamuni during his lifetime understood the *Dharma* in context and in the spirit with which it was delivered, but by the time one hundred years had passed its witnesses had gone.

The following generation of monks sought to institutionalize Buddhism — to convert it into a popular religion. In implementing this strategy they adopted the notion that the general populace required a religious class capable of deciphering the cosmic map and of building the vehicle that would take them to liberation. These monks concluded that as only they could fathom the complex meanings of the Buddha's divine path, in Sakyamuni's absence the responsibility for leading the way fell upon them. To ensure the worthiness of monks who undertook such roles, the Council of Elders governing the Buddhist Order demanded that clerics subscribe to the highest level of moral conduct and remain detached from any temptations. They deemed purity of mind and strength of will to qualify monks as priests able to facilitate ceremonial rites. Hence, suitably trained clerics defined a new role for the religious class. They became spiritual mediums. In their attempt to centralize Buddhism into a religious institution the "Teachings of the Elders" (Skt *Theravada*) provided the first stationary role for monks who had traditionally wandered about the countryside. However, this feature also carved a significant distinction between clerics and lay believers. In continuing to seek justification of their position on the basis of superior wisdom, the newly formed priesthood insisted further that only those fully versed in Buddhist practices could qualify to attain a sage enlightenment (Skt *arhat*). Householders, they held, must tend to mundane matters, and as such by definition were not yet ready in their spiritual journey to claim such status.

The doctrine of clerical distinction reflected an attempt to forge an orthodox teaching. Throughout its history India had upheld its religious class as paramount. Establishing the dominance of the Buddhist religious class on the basis that they were spiritually more evolved than the mainstream of believers reflected an ancient tradition. However, in the case of Buddhism the effort to consolidate Buddhism grew from an attempt to cap a multitude of interpretations arising from the *sutras*.

To many lay and liberal clerics the "Teachings of the Elders" appeared to be a brazen attempt to empower the clerical establishment. They considered the Doctrine of Distinction to be a distortion of the Buddha's intent. Nevertheless, for the brief time that this view dominated it provided the Order with the impetus to build Buddhist monasteries — designed to be centers for clerical prayer and study. These enclaves contributed to the furtherance of Buddhism by producing scholars, much needed for recording and interpreting the metaphoric, surreal accounts of the Enlightened One's visions. However, over a span of several decades monasteries independently produced conflicting interpretations of the *sutras* giving rise to a series of doctrinal schisms. Ironically, the clerical elite who had attempted to seize the reigns of the religion unintentionally sent it spiraling toward the fragmentation they sought to avoid. With multiple breaches besetting their ranks, the influence of the "Teachings of the Elders" declined. Although they lost their dominance over the increasingly liberal and freely developing Buddhist tradition in mainland India, their particular spin on Buddhism survived intact due to a timely introduction of the spellbinding mysteries of Buddhism abroad. Monk missionaries had found willing audiences among the exotic islands of the Indian Ocean where Buddhism was entirely a new revelation. Its presentation as the sacred word of a benevolent and cosmic Buddha who had made his advent in this world for the sake of all the living impressed the natives and their rulers. They embraced the Buddhist priests as spiritual mediums and teachers of universal wisdom.

Here missionaries established a clerically-directed Buddhist institution that ably wove Buddha-worship and tribal custom into a homogeneous denomination. They depicted the enlightenment of Siddhartha of the Gautama family as the advent of the most compassionate being in the universe — an achievement that even the gods recognized to be beyond their power to accomplish. Thus, they placed the Buddha in the position of presiding over all indigenous deities. They taught that the birth of Buddha had been the cosmic manifestation of the father of all creatures; viewed his lifetime as the period when he assumed the role of teacher so that humans may learn how to live nobly; and declared his death to be a return to an eternal paradise from where he protected and forever guided his believers. This priest-dominated, divined view of Gautama Buddha constituted the type of Buddhism that centuries later spread across Asia's southern crescent to Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands.

In India an alternative Buddhist stream had grown in popularity. It espoused an egalitarian doctrine based on the notion that Buddhist wisdom was both universal and inherent to all beings. This view subscribed to Sakyamuni's all-inclusive Great

Ferry (Skt *Mahayana*) *sutras.* Its proponents opposed the dictums of the "Teachings of the Elders" and organized the "Members of the Great Order" (Skt *Mahasangika*). This movement promoted the practice of Selflessness as the means for remaking oneself and society — a feature that found its greatest success among India's urban populations. Its message of self and social transformation to improve the lot of the whole community challenged India's traditional caste system — an inflexible model that kept strict divisions among the populace based on one's station at birth. Based on the universal sanctity of Life, this Buddhist denomination sought to establish a socially dynamic Buddhist model that regarded all beings as equals. As all qualified as candidates for enlightenment, both its member monks and householders could serve as teachers and healers.

The Great Order espoused the view that Buddhism was itself a Great Vehicle (Skt *Mahayana*) built to ferry all human beings to a better, more enlightened future existence, while the "Teachings of the Elders" was a Small Vehicle (Skt *Hinayana*) meant only to transport the few — its clerics. Accordingly, a single virtue would be required by all who wished to embark upon the all-embracing transport. One must be actively engaged in action, speech and thought with the fate of all persons — including family, neighbors or strangers. This call to action to transform oneself and society through Selflessness launched Buddhism's popularity across caste lines. As it grew popular it engendered harmonious, industrious and close-knit communities built on sharing and giving freely of oneself to others, while inspiring individuals to strive toward spiritual growth and the development of self-empowered minds. Over several centuries this communal Buddhism formed the core doctrines that flowed substantially from the north of India to China and later to Japan.

While the post-Sakyamuni monastic and populist Orders disagreed significantly in doctrine and practice, a third, lesser known, informal, and far-sighted Buddhist mission transcended the fray completely. It consisted of caretakers who committed *sutras* to memory — working strictly behind the scenes. These guardians diligently undertook the task in a variety of places — hiding in obscure mountain caves, blending into the midst of busy villages, or taking refuge in monasteries. In each case, they simply devoted their lives to the preservation of the Buddha's Law for the sake of future believers. Commonly, they avoided doctrinal contentions and group associations. Keepers charged with memorization of the *sutras* repeated them daily to ensure their pure transmission to posterity. Preservation of sacred texts by means of oral transmission had been an established tradition practiced long before and during the Buddha's lifetime. It had proved to be a more reliable method of

long-term recording than could be achieved by writing on cured palm leaves with poor quality inks. Among the original works left for them to preserve, one major *sutra* alone may have represented a treatise that encompassed the last eight years of the Buddha's 50-year course. Marked by him for distribution only in the distant future, its earliest guardians must have faced quite a challenge in their attempt to safely and quietly recite its many volumes. Whether they succeeded in keeping the original *Lotus Sutra* entirely intact may never be known, but in essence it survived.

An outside world interrupted Buddhism's budding popularity. India's sixteen independent, yet often contentious, clan-kingdoms inhabiting the vast, disparate subcontinent, could offer little individually to thwart the advance of a conqueror who already had taken most of the world. All succumbed quickly to the mighty Alexander the Great, as soon as his formidable Macedonian military forces arrived (327 B.C.E.) from the West. However, the wide spaces separating Greek battalions left behind to hold the realm provided the Mauryans, India's most powerful clan, with a strategic advantage. Seizing the opportunity they invaded their weakened neighbors and conscripted their clans into one united force. With troops stretched from Europe across Asia the Hellenic Empire chose to negotiate a partnership with the Mauryan leader. Their treaty provided for the withdrawal of Greek forces to a permanent military base in northern India where they would remain as long as their Mauryan allies controlled the peace. In turn, all the kingdoms came under Mauryan rule — the first time in its history that India unified under one Indic emperor.

With his conversion to Buddhism the third Mauryan sovereign launched India on an extraordinary model of governance and its first Golden Age. The Emperor Asoka (c. 268-232 B.C.E.) united the country physically and spiritually. He ordered the building of roads lined with water wells. He foresaw a need for infrastructure that would facilitate long-distance travel and extend the range of communication and trade. Posted on his behalf along these major routes, stone etched edicts called for respect of all living beings and proclaimed that the laws of the land applied equally to all subjects. His royal decrees guaranteed religious freedom throughout India — the first official proclamation of the kind in history. Asoka proudly sent diplomatic emissaries to far away lands, including Hellenic, Egyptian and Middle Eastern cultures to report on the successful result that may be derived by honoring the welfare of one's people. He also dispatched missionaries aboard to spread the word of the Buddha. Sent in every direction the emissaries may have reached as far as the British Isles, where metal coins of his realm had been excavated.

During Asoka's reign, the popularity of Buddhism reached the level of a major religion on par with the established Brahmanist faith. The benevolent sovereign showed his personal devotion to the Buddha by building thousands of reliquary shrines (Skt *stupas*) and many temples in his honor. His renowned appreciation for the Buddha had been immortalized in a Buddhist legend describing the Emperor's past life as follows: during Sakyamuni's lifetime an innocent young boy spotted the Buddha as he walked by with his alms bowl in hand. Bowing before the World Honored One the child reverently offered him a pie he had fashioned out of mud. Struck by the pure sincerity of the gesture, Sakyamuni at once predicted that this child would be reborn some one hundred years later, inherit the throne of India and, as a Buddhist king, govern it with fitting compassion.

Three generations after Asoka's unifying reign India's fate took an unexpected downturn when a Brahmin insurgent assassinated the last of the Mauryan kings. The act signaled the resumption of regional conflicts between clans. The resulting instability prompted the Greeks to descend from their base in the north and reclaim central governance of the nation. Subsequently, their regency remained at the helm for more than 100 years and left a distinct mark on India's culture.

During the following century, the Hellenist modalities established from Socrates to Plato came to bear upon the education of noble and merchant classes. Influenced by the framework of Western philosophy and logic, India's religious scholars felt compelled to justify the doctrinal relevance of Indic thought on dialectic grounds. Consequently, Buddhists and Brahmins participated in formal philosophic debates used to test the logical viability of their differing views. Unfortunately, the Buddha's carefully crafted paradoxical method — superseding one truth with a broader, more profound truth — often appeared as inconsistent thinking in that forum.

Buddhist scholars responded to the challenge by attempting to communicate his views in building block form, a tact that changed Buddhism forever. While brilliant in their philosophical structure and insight, the ensuing analytical commentaries (Skt *shastras*) unwittingly created an array of irreconcilable doctrines that in time splintered Buddhism and obfuscated the unifying arc holding together the whole *Dharma*. Ironically, in their desire to prevail over these debates well-intentioned scholars prompted a unification of a different kind. In attempting to block the unique doctrinal strengths of their competitor, they mixed Brahmanist and Buddhist dogma. Consequently, both religions co-opted each other. Once Buddhism in India deviated from its original spirit and profound intent, it never recovered it.

No other theory symbolized the division and straying of Buddhist doctrine more than the belief in an incarnate hierarchy of spiritual development — a thesis possessing an uncanny resemblance to the socio-cosmic caste system created by the Brahmins. Accordingly, one's capacity to fathom Buddhism related to the stage one had reached in one's cosmic spiritual progress over many lifetimes. To justify this view, its proponents observed that Sakyamuni had been able to teach his disciples only that which they would comprehend, because he had possessed a supernatural vision with which to see the stage of progress they had reached in their spiritual trek. They surmised from this that those who were able to grasp more profound concepts, master meditations and other difficult practices were endowed from birth with the talents to do so — incarnate abilities said to be merited in prior lives from acts undertaken in service of the Buddha.

Logically, these learned monks concluded, clerics constituted those persons who had advanced spiritually to a superior evolutionary level qualified for entry into the enlightened realm of *nirvana.* The scholars advised less spiritually-evolved ordinary folk to redouble their devotional efforts in their present life so that they may speed their cosmic evolution toward final liberation. One way to merit advancement, the monks declared, would be to pay homage to the Buddha with offerings to the monastic community that served him. They promised that donations (Skt *dhyana*) would aid lay benefactors in gaining higher faculties for the next birth.

In Sakyamuni's time people generously sustained religious wanderers with alms consisting of meager food and shelter. In return for their noble gestures they were blessed with the promise of spiritual merit. In Hellenist India the tradition turned into an institution. The Order encouraged monetary contributions and directed the funds toward the construction of Buddhist facilities, such as monasteries to house clerics and memorial grounds built for public worship. They hired artisans to paint Buddhist temple-halls with colorful depictions of the Buddha in past life adventures and to create sculptures of his human image. Such portrayals contradicted the will of Sakyamuni who had never allowed a representation of himself. For two hundred years after his passing, artists only used symbols in referring to him — tree, wheel, throne, etc. However, the demand of the times to worship a divined human form prevailed. Due to Mediterranean influences, India's own rich cultural heritage and a global trend calling for the creation of objects of worship, the first visages of the Buddha appeared. The artwork reflected two prevailing views of the Enlightened One: (1) as a sage — a serene Indic wise and holy man, cast upright in a Socratic-like form or seated in meditation, and (2) as a god — a folkloric image of an Indic

deity styled to rival Zeus in power and grace. While Hellenists exerted pressure on Buddhism to depict its pantheon in tangible form, Buddhism's irreversible decision to embark on the path of producing sanctified portrayals of its founder to a greater extent may have been in response to the increasing popularity in its own backyard of a new and formidable religious competitor — one equipped with an impressive array of human and anthropomorphic Indic gods.

In contrast to Buddhism's inconceivably noble pantheon and its pledge of relief for all suffering humans, the gods of Hinduism clearly focused their powers on the welfare of the locals. Its particularly Indic deities and heroes fought on a spiritual plane for India's independence from the oppression of evil forces who operated both on a cosmic and incarnate level and at once preyed upon the individual mind and the fate of the collective nation.

Hinduism's appeal coincided with the end of Alexandrian globalism and the rise of the Roman Empire. The new European power's decision to avoid overextending its reach to the Far East created a political vacuum in India. Left on its own, India soon fell back to its old habit of relentless regional clan warfare. The consequences of this distraction became evident in due course, when the Kusana, a nomadic clan-nation with excellent military skills, was forced out of China across its border with India. Quickly turning from the hunted into the hunter, the Kusana realized that they could easily capture an India weakened by several decades of internal strife. A century-long Kusana reign ensued. During this period India lived in relative peace, as it did under occupying predecessors. However, its people had tired of foreign domination. The experience had awakened a sense of national pride in India — an expression cultivated by Hinduism and ignored by Buddhists. Slowly, the people of the Buddha's homeland began to lose their taste for passivity, transcendence and open-ended universality and increasingly turned for their identity to Hinduism — a religion that merged the traditions of ancient Brahmanist visions (Skt *Vedas*) with a new testament (Skt *Mahabharata*) that deemed India to be a fabled land endowed with glorious cosmic significance.

By the turn of the new millennium, Buddhism's fortunes reversed. Doctrinal confusion, elitism, schism and social detachment stalled its popularity. Ironically, while the era of idealistic purity established by the Buddhist teachings began to wither away in India, word of their profundity just then reached China (c. 67 C.E.). Had it not been for its timely transfer to its northern neighbor, most of the *sutras* — including the *Lotus Sutra* — surely would have faded into historical obscurity.

7
Heaven's Terrace

When they first encountered it, the Chinese delighted in Buddhism simply as a mystical curiosity — as entertaining as a magic act. Over the next three centuries it gained a firm foothold primarily among intellectuals who deemed its meditations, cosmology, and divinations to be worthy of kinship with their traditional Taoist and Confucian ideals. As they learned more, they were seduced by its ambivalence — at once familiar and strange, earthly and cosmic, complex and orderly. China's ruling elite, including emperors, courtiers and scholars, seemingly fell under its spell.

As China's interest in Buddhism grew, it required that the *sutras* be translated. The educated class charged with administrating the royal government pushed for the funding of an ambitious translations project headed by a consummate linguist and devout Buddhist, Kumarajiva (c. 344 - 413 C.E.). He led the effort to produce translations of several key *sutras* featuring among them the *Lotus Sutra* (c. 406 C.E.).

In its original Sanskrit language the full title of the *Lotus Sutra* read as follows: *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra. (*pronounced *Saah-d Daah-rma Poon-da Ree-ka Soo-tra).* Literally, it translated as *The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law*. However, as the metaphoric Sanskrit often concealed a hidden subtext, the reference to the "Lotus Flower" (Skt *Pundarika*) of the "Wonderful Law" (Skt *Saddharma*) similarly hinted at a profound message embodied within the title of the *Lotus Sutra.*

The word *Dharma* (suffix of *Saddharma*) referred to the Truth of the Reality of All Existence taught by the Buddha. It encompassed the universe and everything in it — all that may be observed through physical, intuitive or enlightened vision. Its range included space, time and undetected dimensions. Its diversity and dynamics manifested as sentient and insentient beings and in Nature's bounty. Its universal wisdom resonated in the implacable constancy of Nature's laws. The Buddha's *Dharma* defined a singularity that subsumed all of relative existence. Still, its scope extended beyond relativity to include all possibilities — boundless potential.

Sakyamuni progressively had expanded the profundity of the *Dharma*. Finally, in the *Lotus Sutra* he described a culminating *Dharma* and characterized it as his most Wonderful Reality (Skt *Saddharma*) — a wondrous vision of enlightenment, more amazing and inspiring than any he had told earlier. To convey that the *Lotus-Dharma* contained the last word on the subject, the prefix *Sad,* literally "six-sided," connoted "Perfect" or "Wonderful." Hence, *Sad-dharma* reflected a "Perfect Reality," as in the universally inherent, truly wonderful, absolute Reality of All Existence.

The word *Pundarika* in the *sutra's* title referred to a mythic White Lotus flower. Extraordinarily rare and incomparably beautiful, this eight-petal efflorescence was symbolic of absolute purity. It reflected the attributes of a common Lotus in that its seedpod and blossom displayed together above the waterline — a metaphor for the principle that every moment of existence at once exhibited the effect (blossom) of past causes while it contained the causes (seeds) for effects to come in the next moment. Yet, the choice of the pure White Lotus in the title referred specifically to the Buddha's Enlightenment. Thus, the title declared that this *sutra* simultaneously embodied the cause (seed) and the effect of Perfect Enlightenment (blossom).

Kumarajiva translated the Sanskrit title *Sad-dharma-punda-rika-sutra* into five Chinese characters written as *Miao-fa-lien-hua-ching*. This meticulous conversion captured intact the original profundity embedded therein. Subsequently, this phrase was transliterated by the Japanese who pronounced it as *Myo-ho-ren-ge-kyo*.

Chinese translators had attempted six different renditions of the *Lotus Sutra*, each given a slightly different title, but over the centuries scholars widely lauded Kumarajiva's edition as the peerless one. When he was called upon to lecture on the *sutras* Kumarajiva repeatedly declared to ruler and citizens alike that while his body may be impure, his tongue was as pure as the heavens. So confident was he of his work that he announced: "Upon my death be certain that I am cremated. If my tongue is consumed by the flames then you may discard all the *sutras* that I have translated."[16] His vow grew so popular that folks greeted one another with: "may you live a long life so that you may attend Kumarajiva's funeral." When the time came hundreds of thousands saw his body reduced to ashes, yet his tongue remained unscorched by flames. Moreover, witnesses close to the pyre claimed to have sighted upon his tongue a blue lotus flower radiating beams of pure light.

Kumarajiva's highly respected translation notwithstanding, the *Lotus Sutra's* rightful place among the many *sutras* became a matter for debate for the next 150

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[16] *Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin.*

years until enough *sutras* could be translated to allow Chinese Buddhist scholars to categorize, interpret, prioritize and analyze their meanings and relative importance. Finally, from his temple monastery located high atop Mount Heaven's Terrace (Chn *Tian-tai)* in China's southern region, the brilliant sixth century Buddhist scholar Zhi-yi (c. 538 - 597) discovered that all of the Buddha's doctrines converged in the *Lotus Sutra*. Although widely regarded among Chinese Buddhists as the father of modern meditation, the chief cleric of Heaven's Terrace Monastery considered his lesser known insights into the *Lotus Sutra* to be his life's purpose.

In his view the "One direct vehicle" of the *Lotus Sutra* — a means that would allow all beings, without exception, to unearth Perfect Enlightenment — defined the Buddha's sole intent from the start of his teachings. Arguing against him, Zhi-yi's doctrinal opponents countered that the Buddha never specified an absolute and final vehicle. They considered some of the other *sutras* to be at least as relevant or even more important than the *Lotus Sutra*. In response to the clerical uproar raised in this matter, the Emperor of China called for a debate between proponents of the eight major Chinese Buddhist sects of the day and the lone Zhi-yi. In the presence of the Emperor, the country's foremost scholars of Buddhism made their objections known. Patiently waiting for all to complete their dissertations, the sage of Heaven's Terrace calmly followed with an irrefutable analysis that proved the *Lotus Sutra* to be the Buddha's ultimate teaching. Clearly defeated, the others acknowledged that Zhi-yi had prevailed and apologized for their shortsightedness. The *Lotus Sutra* had earned him the acclaim of the Emperor who bestowed upon him the honorific title of Great Teacher Who Speaks Wisdom From Heaven's Terrace (Chn *Tian-tai)*.

Zhi-yi cited in the text that Sakyamuni himself upheld the supremacy of the *Lotus Sutra*. The Buddha specifically directed that the *Lotus Sutra* contained the *Dharma* of Perfect Enlightenment that he always has preached, now preaches, and ever will preach[17] — declaring it to be his intended legacy. Although nearly every *sutra* stated that its contents were superior to any preceding text, only this one said:

> *This Law-Flower Sutra is the mysterious treasury of the Perfectly Enlightened Declarers of Truth, which is supreme above all sutras...This sutra is preeminent among all the sutras. I have always guarded and not prematurely revealed it. Now indeed is the time to preach it to you all.*[18]

[17] *Lotus Sutra,* Chapter 10 — A Teacher of the Law
[18] *Lotus Sutra,* Chapter 14 — A Happy Life

Zhi-yi dictated a record of commentaries on the *Lotus Sutra* in three volumes — two exegeses defining and interpreting the words, concepts and symbolism of the *Lotus Sutra,* and a third volume of insights and observations that he derived from the sacred text. In his *Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra* and *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*, he noted that embedded in the metaphors of this pinnacle *sutra* the Buddha had bequeathed a "mystic gift" to future generations. Interchangeably referred to as a "Perfectly Endowed Reality," "Mystic Cosmology," or "Wonderful Law" (Skt *Sad-dharma;* Chn/Jpn trnslit. *Myoho)*, this *Dharma* embodied the secret wisdom possessed by all the buddhas ever to appear throughout time and space.

In his third volume, *On Great Concentration and Insight,* Zhi-yi proposed that one who wished to pierce the subconscious obstacles that stood in the way of truly clear insight must study the cosmic realms enumerated in earlier *sutras,* but set his mind subsequently on the quintessential realm of Perfect Enlightenment revealed in the *Lotus Sutra*. The *Lotus Sutra*, he wrote, opened the mind's eye to the hidden gate of Perfect Enlightenment and revealed the essential "Truth of the Reality of All Existence." Therein, the aspirant would be able to envision the grand nature of the Buddha's cosmic blueprint — the *modus operandi* of existence.

After completing a comprehensive compilation and categorization of the entire spectrum of Sakyamuni's Buddhism and conducting a breathtaking analysis of all *sutras*, Zhi-yi constructed an unprecedented syncretic adjudication of the Buddhist cosmography and reconstructed Sakyamuni's progressive method for teaching it. He saw the Buddha's teachings as a continually expanding view culminating with an all-encompassing configuration of existence. The sage noted that the *Dharma* as a whole amounted to nothing less than a Theory of Everything — one universal system that applied equally to explain all expressions of Nature, including that of human behavior. Zhi-yi had discovered hidden in the Buddhist text a treatise on the process that gave existence its dynamic complexity and variety. He found that below cognitive human consciousness existed a process that defined every moment of existence. This invisible process caused all living things to integrate and evolve. At the root of this activity was a profound cosmic reality — the essence of Life — that interpenetrated everything at once and for all time. Zhi-yi's definition of Life extended beyond biological enterprise. He deemed its nature to be the prime mover of all that was, is and will be, infusing all physical forms throughout all time.

Life, as Zhi-yi viewed it through the filter of the *Lotus Sutra*, encompassed the animate and inanimate, sentient and insentient, as well as thought and substance. Accordingly, every nuance of Nature was an expression of cosmic Life. Each instant

of Life was like a single note of music. The string of notes that constituted mortal phenomena and existence was Life's song. He had envisioned a universe filled with living entities dancing to the rhythms of one grand, perpetual symphony.

Sakyamuni had proposed that across an eternal span of time, infinite range of space and indeterminable number of lifetimes, the battle between ignorance and enlightenment saw no bounds. Accordingly, mortal beings oblivious to the great wisdom inherent in Life repeatedly suffered, as they transmigrated aimlessly across the vast field of existence. However, the Buddha held that for the sake of human beings who sought his help he had furnished a "map" — the *Dharma* — that would lead them to Enlightenment. Nevertheless, in the more than one thousand years since the Buddha spoke his worldview in an ancient language given to dreamlike realities, Zhi-yi was first to discern it as a single overarching cosmography. While a millennium of Buddhist doctrinal divisions and deviations had torn the mythic "map" to pieces, this sage from his perch upon the lofty terrace of the *Lotus Sutra* reassembled it whole — in appropriately Chinese fashion: as an ontological thesis.

He converted the Buddha's metaphoric *Dharma* into an architronic model of the way Life worked. Through it he showed that with the *Lotus Sutra* Sakyamuni had completed a 50-year dissertation on an integral theory that explained existence. First, Zhi-yi extracted from the *Dharma* a database of attributes common to all the living — a universal set of states-of-being. Secondly, he deduced that each mortal subject defined an area of time and space constituting his sphere-of-existence — an interactive field of experience where his states-of-being manifested. Thirdly, Zhi-yi observed that the activated state-of-being defining a mortal's sphere-of-existence at a particular moment reflected the subject's causative input. He concluded that every mortal entity was accountable for the time-space sphere that defined its existence regardless of its form, the length of time it existed, or its place of residence in the temporal world. Consequently, he explained, the quality of human experience at a particular instant derived from a state-of-being that arose in a being's body, mind and environment in response to the causes the being cultivated in his present and earlier lives. Accordingly, an ontological storehouse hidden beneath the cognitive surface housed a spectrum of ten fundamental states of Life.

The set of "Ten Worlds" forming the foundation of Zhi-yi's metaphysical model reflected ten states-of-existence that he extracted from Sakyamuni's transmigratory cosmology. These "worlds" represented the realms of rebirth, as well as the range of conditional states mortals experienced psychologically and environmentally. The

full set of these milieus provided a spectrum of human experiences ranging from the depths of hellish torture to the heights of enlightened perfection. From Zhi-yi's vantage, people typically "lived in" or "traveled through" this palette of "worlds" or states-of-being, each capable of painting mortal subjects with its characteristic hue.

In the *Lotus Sutra* Sakyamuni first depicted the Ten Worlds together, thereby portraying them as a single unified matrix of variables. As the *sutra* opened, the Buddha sat still in meditation as a beam of light emanated from his forehead to illuminate the entire universe. The spotlight fell at once upon ten cosmic realms ranging in kind from a world of depravity to one of enlightenment — each place exhibited a characteristic scene reflecting the particulars of that sphere-of-existence. Thus, before he uttered a word, the Buddha showed that throughout the universe one would find a common range of conditions, as follows:

Torment and hate, cravings and greed, wrath and abuse, fear and power defined the first four worlds — Buddhism's so-called *Four Evil Paths* of (1) Hell, (2) Hunger, (3) Anger, and (4) Animality. Dramatically described in human terms, the world of Hell encapsulated the lowest state-of-being — ranging from the ravages of insanity to severe physical pain; Hunger spanned small desires to insatiable addiction; Anger started from resentment to a loss of self-control; Animality included the priority of self-preservation, as expressed either through dominance or submission.

Sakyamuni had included these four paths in describing the *Six States of Existence* through which mortals ordinarily traveled in their lifetime. The six included two additional states-of-existence: (5) Humanity and (6) Heaven. The Human realm, a middle level between Life's darkest and purest states, defined a relatively neutral state-of-being wherein mortals dreamed, played, worked, rested and routinely acted as if they were in a sleepwalking-state that had no special consequence. The realm of Heaven commonly defined the highest realm of existence. However, in the Buddhist system it described only temporary joy — ranging from the sense of satisfaction to the ecstasies of rapture. Commonly, these six states demonstrably reflected in a person's facial expression and body language.

The next three worlds were not outwardly visible, although individuals could discern them easily within themselves. These worlds coincided with Buddhism's *Three Vehicles* representing Life's developmental paths: (7) Learning, (8) Realization, and (9) Selflessness. These states-of-being emerged as one sought to advance, adapt or grow in some way — mentally, emotionally, physically, or spiritually.

Prior to the *Lotus Sutra* Sakyamuni had deemed the highest of the realms — the (10) Buddha-state — to be indescribable, as it transcended relative notions. While

the nine of the ten worlds had received ample illustration in earlier *sutras*, he had avoided the elucidation of the tenth landscape where his indestructible happiness and boundless wisdom resided. In the Ceremony in the Air, however, the Buddha described his ultimate realm and declared that it was at once universally inherent in Life and accessible to all beings. Consequently, he implied that the ultimate state of Buddhahood could be brought to the fore by any mortal. The *Lotus Sutra* itself, Zhi-yi confirmed, contained the means — the "One direct vehicle" — with which one would be able to see the Buddha's eternal landscape. In embracing this vehicle one could rise to the highest world, whereupon one could realize the presence of the Enlightened One permeating his mortal sphere-of-existence.

Zhi-yi not only wanted to explain how Life operated and why it worked the way it did, he fundamentally sought to prove through his model that all who possessed Life also owned the Perfect Enlightenment hidden within it. However, he understood that pointing the way in itself could not awaken mortal beings to that which in their mind was unimaginable. The profound mystery of Life was such that few humans could recognize the tenth world within their ever-changing self. It remained beyond their scope, because of their total immersion in the moment.

Human beings "traveled" seamlessly in, out and through their states-of-being, but rarely did they discern that what they felt, thought and sensed about and within their milieu reflected the perceptual colorations of the "world" they experienced at the moment. As these transient states manifested, they permeated a subject's body, mind, present circumstances, past experiences and future potentials. According to Zhi-yi, the dynamics of Life dictated that as one of the ten states activated, it pervaded a subject's sphere-of-existence with a particular condition or experiential tone. Thus, the Ten Worlds took turns in shaping and coloring the senses, feelings, perceptions, relationships, environments and physical attributes — each infusing a subject's sphere-of-existence for an instant.

Zhi-yi reasoned that this underlying mechanism constituted the means with which Life in its fathomless wisdom empowered humans to determine the quality of their existence. He theorized that through the amalgam of Ten Worlds mortals defined the potentials and parameters of their state-of-being and a corresponding sphere-of-existence. Accordingly, a trigger cause would energize a conditional state to rise instantly from the subcognitive storehouse of latent effects that the subject had fashioned over a span of numerous existences. Invariably some of these effects were called forth to manifest onto the surface of cognitive existence. Hence, upon the mortal field, all beings expelled a perpetual stream of conditional qualities that

flowed in and out of Life's subterranean essence. Like the exhale and inhale of a breath, this process was so natural, subtle and seamless as to be imperceptible. In the instant in which one state-of-being made its presence known, it at once recoiled into the profound oblivion from which it emerged. One's state-of-the-moment washed upon the shore of mortal existence only to recede immediately into the transcendent ocean from which it arose.

Like other cultures and religions that came before it, Buddhism acknowledged the existence of a spiritual symbiosis between human beings and a greater Reality. Ancient seers concluded that humanity at creation and human beings at birth had acquired cosmic attributes. They cast Man in the image of the divine and saw his behavior reflected in the configuration of stars. The Buddha deemed all that was mortal to be a reflection of the universe-at-large and observed the behavior of all things to be guided by the natural Law of Cause and Effect. Sakyamuni referred to the large-scale cosmos by the name "three-thousand-great-thousandfold universe" — a number derived from ancient Indic views of a vast multigalactic cosmography. In Zhi-yi's view, the name reflected the multifaceted structure of any living sphere-of-existence — whether its form was human, astral, or other. The number reflected facets inherent in an integral configuration undergirding the behavior of all things.

The Chinese scholar perceived the Indic Buddha's cosmography to be a system of 3,000 integrated components that defined any sphere-of-existence in complete detail anywhere and anytime it appeared. Zhi-yi set out to decipher its building blocks so that he may know Life's inner language. Fundamentally, he sought to break the code with which the "Book of Life" was written. He ascertained from the Lotus Sutra the completion of a system of characteristics surprisingly analogous to the 300 primary pictograph characters forming the basis for Chinese writing. Much as in a written composition content is achieved through the selection and interaction of a vocabulary of words, and words, in turn, are formed of writing characters, Zhi-yi pictured a similar dynamic whereby the particulars and peculiarities of mortal reality are like "sentences, words, and characters" describing the innumerable spheres-of-existence — each constituting the momentary content of life.

From three categorical sets he extracted from the *sutras* — Ten Worlds, Three Levels of Identity, and Ten Identifying Characteristics — Zhi-yi derived a code of 3,000 variables forming a subtle system of "spiritual genes" by which each moment of existence gained "color" and "shape." By breaking down the three categories he found in the sutras, he discovered the theortical elements of the system, as follows:

- **100 States of Existence** — the Ten Worlds defined the foundational tier of the 3,000-fold system. Zhi-yi derived one hundred states from the ten due to the *Lotus Sutra's* contention that the Ten Worlds folded into each other. Accordingly, a human being's basic condition may be rooted in one world (e.g. Hunger), while for the moment he may experience any of the ten. The interpenetration of the worlds (10 x 10) raised the number of states to 100.
- **Three Levels of Identity** — the *Lotus Sutra* brought together Three Levels of Identity that applied to every mortal subject. The Three Identities existed simultaneously: (1) individual, (2) collective, and (3) cosmic. [Illustrated as: (1) unique person, (2) member of the human race, (3) product of Nature].
- **Ten Defining Characteristics of Existence** — a list of ten characteristics that appeared together for the first and last time in the second chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. They defined any subject's sphere-of-existence in terms of its: (1) Scope (including appearance), (2) Nature, and (3) Essence. Its (4) Power and (5) Function defined the subject's potency and purpose in conducting Life's activities. The next four characteristics defined the causes and effects that connected a subject's past, present and future: (6) Latent Causes, (7) External Causes, (8) Potential Effects and (9) Manifest Effects. The last characteristic, (10) Order, kept all of Life's variables working with one another in a consistent manner — assuring the continuity of existence.

In total, the 100 states-of-being interpenetrated the three levels of one's identity (100 x 3) to produce a factor of 300 identity-states. In turn, these were permeated by the ten characteristics of existence (30 x 100) for a total of 3,000 Life variables.

In maintaining that Sakyamuni's "three-thousand-great-thousandfold cosmos" was a metaphor for a single matrix of 3,000 interpenetrating variables that defined the diverse manifestations of Life, Zhi-yi inferred that the Buddha in his infinite wisdom had bequeathed the knowledge for a generic operating system to a future time when it could be utilized to fathom Perfect Enlightenment. Zhi-yi was first to see the Truth of the Reality of All Existence as a universal coding system that was open-ended to allow for the free expression of individual desires, responsive to the will of any subject to influence its course, while steadfast and determinative at its core. Accordingly, mortals drew their breaths of experience from the pool of causes they amassed over innumerable lifetimes in which they expressed countless desires. Consequently, the fleeting nature of an individual's spheres-of-existence revealed at once ephemeral identities reflected in the infinite mirror of Life's seminal Reality:

> *None of the variables settle down, even for a moment, but all emerge and vanish anew every moment; and observe that they emerge, settle, change and vanish instantly...Desires are innumerable...Their meanings are innumerable…The innumerable meanings originate from One Reality. This Reality...constitutes the true meaning [of all things].*[19]

The theory provided a rationale for universal access to Perfect Enlightenment. Zhi-yi's model showed that Life's "true meaning" was hidden from mortal view by the countless meanings (i.e., conditions) originating from it. Powerful enough to produce innumerable creative expressions at once and vast enough to enfold and unfold an infinite universe of 3,000 interpenetrating dimensions, this One Perfectly Enlightened Reality was also the source of Life's ultimate state:

> *Realize that you and your environment manifest the singularity of Life as expressed through the 3,000 interdependent variables of Reality. When we experience enlightenment, according to this principle, our life pervades the entire universe both physically and spiritually.*[20]

Notwithstanding his great facility for conceptual thinking, Zhi-yi intended his profound observations to aid his students in extracting profound meaning from the *Dharma*. In the main lecture hall of the Heaven's Terrace Monastery resident monks listened to their teacher's revelations regarding the secrets of the *Lotus Sutra,* and in the monastery's meditation halls they practiced mind-expanding, breath-counting meditations. Their group regimens consisted of breath-control meditations used to clear the mind of distractions and open the way to higher levels of consciousness, wherein contemplation may lead them to breakthrough insights.

Their conceptual studies and meditation exercises prepared them for an intense personal ritual meant to be practiced alone behind closed doors. Zhi-yi designed a profoundly private 21-day cloistered ritual involving the repeated recitation of the text of the *Lotus Sutra,* contemplation of the *sutra's* revelatory message, repentance for one's failure to see the Buddha's legacy in its proper light, and prayer for one's senses to be transformed by the *sutra's* ultimate Truth. It was the first liturgy for fathoming the scope, essence and nature of the *sutra's* Perfect Enlightenment.

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[19] *The Sutra of Innumerable Meanings (preface to the Lotus Sutra)*

[20] *Commentaries On Great Concentration and Insight by Miao-lo* (c. 711-782 C.E.)

The esoteric nature of Zhi-yi's *Lotus-dharma* ritual reflected his view that he could not reveal publicly the Perfect Enlightenment he had uncovered. While he taught its secrets to his students, he made no effort to inform the ordinary Chinese of his day of his *Lotus-dharma* practice.

Zhi-yi discerned that the *Lotus Sutra* not only contained a profound message meant to enlighten the human condition, but it also served as an oracle. It provided clues for identifying the person and persons who would unearth its secrets. Further, it specified that its banner would be raised in a land outside of India at a future time more than two millennia after the passing of Sakyamuni.

The *Lotus Sutra* prophesied that a "preacher would appear after the extinction of Sakyamuni in the last five hundred years"[21] — implying that a clerical figure would lead a revival of the *Lotus Sutra* at a time specified by the Buddha. He had designated that era as the third millennium following his passing. In the Ceremony in the Air, the Buddha vested the noble leader of the Selfless Volunteers, Demeanor of Supreme Essence, with the mission to introduce the "One direct vehicle" to a future age characterized by the demise of Buddhist wisdom and a decay of human spirit. The *sutra* foretold that Buddhism would decline slowly over a span of 2,000 years until the original intent of Sakyamuni's teachings would appear to be lost. At that time the messianic prophecy would begin to emerge.

The Buddha described the 500-year eras to ensue, as follows:[22]

1 For the first 500 years after his passing, people practicing Buddhism would be blessed with blissfulness. In the second 500-year period, the devoted would find peace in meditation. These first 1,000 years would reflect his Era of Purity, because the integrity of Sakyamuni's teachings would be maintained in their original form.

2 The third 500 years would be a period of ritual — reading, intoning, and following precepts. The fourth 500 years would be for erecting statues, sanctuaries and temples. These second 1,000 years would be called the Counterfeit Age, as ritual and institutional priorities will overtake the original wisdom, and false concepts will emerge.

3 With the arrival of the fifth 500 years the purity of the Buddha's Law would all but disappear. The world would find itself embroiled in strife and divided by a myriad of perceptions. This fifth 500-year

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[21] *Lotus Sutra,* Chapter 10 — A Teacher of the Law

[22] *Mahasamnipata Sutra*

> period would signal the beginning of the Age of Decadence when the Buddha's teachings will lose their power. At that time, a valiant "preacher" who had the wherewithal to teach "The Truth of the Reality of All Existence" would make his appearance. Many other teachers would follow in his footsteps for millennia to come. In due course with the emergence and acceptance of the ultimate Truth the Age of Decadence will transform into the Era of the Great Pure Law — and last for 10,000 years and beyond.

In *Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra* Zhi-yi proclaimed: "In the fifth 500-year era, the gift of Perfect Endowment (Jpn *myo*) shall begin to spread and benefit mankind far into the future."[23] Herein, Zhi-yi suggested that some 700 years after his own lifetime the most far-reaching of the Buddha's prophecies would start to manifest when the dauntless votary of its message would come forth to champion the cause of the "One direct vehicle." His mission would be to provide the mortal world with the means to accomplish true joy and fulfillment. Zhi-yi discerned that sixth century China was not ripe for the wide transmission of the Buddha's legacy. Clearly, he had determined, the appropriate time for advocating it publicly had not arrived.

[23] Zhi-yi of Tian-tai, *Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, Volume 1

8
Nichiren

For the Chinese masses Buddhism delivered hope of better future existences and divine power to help them through their mundane concerns. The vision and means to overcome their hardships and worries had been addressed in the *sutras*. In breathtaking detail the scriptures described enlightened domains located in every direction at the farthest reaches of the universe. Accordingly, angelic beings who interned in these celestial lands under the tutelage of great buddhas would come to the aid of earthly believers in trouble. In addition, empathic gods representing a variety of cosmic functions would extend their helping hand.

With the construction of attractive temples and memorial towers (Chn *pagodas*) millions of enthusiastic devotees flocked to pray for good health, long life, miracle cures, divine intervention and salvation after death. Surrounded by majestic wall paintings depicting exhilarating scenes garnered from the *sutras*, Buddhists looked to their priests to facilitate beneficial responses from the compassionate cosmos that lay beyond their reach. The ritual recitations of the *sutras* constituted the means with which priests conjured cosmic forces. Accordingly, the selfless angelic beings residing clear across the universe could hear the vocalized words of the Buddha no matter how far their point of origin. Ever thirsting for enlightened pronouncements, the sounds compelled them to dispatch the aid needed by the faithful.

Buddhism also offered a way to eliminate the otherwise certain suffering one would carry into their next existence — an appealing feature to a peasant populace doomed to back-breaking work. Clerics promised that believers who proved to be virtuous in action, speech and thought in their present existence would be granted rebirth to a Buddhist paradise. In their next lifetime they would be welcomed to a divine province ruled by an immortal buddha who radiated supernatural bliss. New inhabitants in his blessed pure land would live in lotus flowers wherein for tens of thousands of years they incubated enlightened wisdom and perfect bliss.

While salvation suited the needs of the people, for the ruling class the religion's appeal centered on their aspirations for greatness. Although liberation via rebirth had gained popularity among Chinese householders, the clerical Order understood that they substantially operated in this world, because of special favors Buddhism enjoyed from the power elite. The imperial class — convinced that their rebirth would be among their royal ancestors — demanded that the religion provide them with profound cosmic knowledge worthy of their positions as celestial rulers in the earthly domain. Hence, China's Buddhist leaders competed for the attention of the court in an attempt to show that their sect had the ability to divine, intercept and even change the causes underlying human events. Those deemed to be most wise would gain imperial support and would be employed as advisors and educators.

Zhi-yi's breathtaking syncretic insights and inspiring meditation techniques had captured the high regard of the court in his day, but soon after he passed away scholar-monks seeking to revitalize the acceptance of their own schools of thought descended like buzzards upon his brilliant work. They imitated, adapted, picked apart and obfuscated its awesome range. To avoid accusations of plagiarism, they conveniently overlooked his core premise: that the *Lotus Sutra* was the source of his wisdom. They cleverly feathered the nests of their own agendas in a melange of rhetoric decorated with similar categorizations attributed to *sutras* they favored.

The next imperial dynasty to gain control of China ushered in a golden age of invention, discovery and artistry. The change at the helm fostered a reformation of tastes and creative expressions. The times demanded more sophisticated, colorful and mystical expressions from the country's religious leaders. Buddhism was called upon to expand its focus beyond literary pursuits to a conjuring of exalted cosmic visions in meditation and the display of miraculous results through prayer.

The timely arrival of a host of Buddhist scholars from India speeded the trend toward mysticism. They espoused "secret" esoteric views, which China's clerical community found difficult to resist. That such practices came from the birthplace of the Buddha implied that in spite of centuries of best efforts China still may have overlooked the "best" that Buddhism had to offer. Actually, more than a millennium after Sakyamuni wandered about its vast land, what remained of Indic Buddhism had been seduced by Hinduism. As a hybrid of the two religions emerged over time, Hindu rituals, deities and doctrines forayed into the Buddhist *Dharma*. In order to assure the religion's survival Indic Buddhists had allowed the incorporation of non-Buddhist beliefs. Hinduism also borrowed concepts from Buddhism. Consequently, a loss of significant distinction all but assured the slow death of Buddhism in India.

Chinese Buddhism now faced a similar identity crisis as the imported blend of seductive Indic teachings began to reshape Buddhist thought in China. Once that door had opened, the mystic doctrines of Taoism and Confucianist values entered the Buddhist Order, as well. Clerics driven by a desire to offer what people wanted and to show that Buddhism encompassed the best that other religions had to offer ignored the origin of these practices and incorporated them into Buddhist tradition.

For the next two hundred years traditional Buddhism found itself besieged by a wave of reformation embodied in the term: the Diamond Vehicle (Skt *vajrayana*). It integrated classic Buddhist doctrines with Hindu-derived practices focused on generating spiritual euphoria (i.e., Tantrism), Taoist energy-body channeling and healing treatments, and elements of Confucian disciplines and values. The newly emerged Buddhist stylings incorporated mystic movement and non-movement, as follows: (1) ritual dances, sacred gestures, chanting and manipulations of internal energy flows were aimed at lengthening life and infusing the body and mind with ecstacy; (2) severe disciplines inducing mental transcendence were combined with extreme physical stoicism to achieve an exalted connection with cosmic divinities.

While long hours of meditative regimens and mystic rituals suited many monks, it also led some to reject the *sutras* entirely. Those adopting a meditation-only view claimed that words (i.e., any literal works) by virtue of their inherent limits could not convey a transcendent Truth — only point to it. Among them grew the belief that the Buddha telephathically conveyed the secret of his Perfect Enlightenment to a disciple and in that pure form it was passed through the ages from one mentor to the next. To know this secret one must scale the mind's precipitous mountainside, a metaphor for conquering all illusions. The aspirant who climbed increasingly higher levels of consciousness until he reached the lofty state of enlightenment would see the Truth of All Existence from the summit of peaceful bliss (Skt *nirvana*).

China's journey into monastic esotericism ferried it into a state of insularity lulled by introspection. Suddenly, the Buddhist Order was shocked into awakening. They had enraged a megalomanical Emperor who saw Buddhist beliefs as a threat to his own self-perceived celestial status as a living god. He ordered that Buddhist monks be put to death. A blood bath began. Many clerics carrying their religious treasures went into hiding in remote rice-farming and mountain communities.

Although they survived several years of savage terror, the nightmare ordeal left a permanent mark on Chinese Buddhism. Whereas it prompted a small monastic group to devise defensive fighting skills — martial arts — that at once balanced the traditional Buddhist belief in the sanctity of Life with a rejection of martyrdom, for

the mainstream majority of clerics in China the experience left an unmistakable scar regarding the whims of imperial power. Consequently, a once vital Order would remain meek — never to recover its inspired intellect or principled audacity.

As the Chinese celebrated the one thousandth year since Buddhism had arrived in their midst (c. 1052 C.E.), which by their count also marked the start of the fifth 500-year period of Buddhism (2,000 years from Sakyamuni's passing), their superb pursuit of Life's meaning had given way to a religion concerned primarily with life beyond death. Although it continued to function as a folk religion responsive to the needs of a large, faithful peasant population, the original vitality of Buddhism had died. Some 100 years later, near the end of the twelfth century, ruthless Mongolian hordes led by Genghis Khan swept down from the North and dealt it a final blow.

Japan discovered Buddhism in the sixth century. The King of Pakeche (present-day Korea) formally introduced it to Buddhism when he dispatched a diplomatic mission charged with delivering to the Japanese Emperor several Chinese language Buddhist manuscripts, copies of *sutras* (including the *Lotus Sutra*) and a wood-carved icon of the Buddha. In an accompanying letter, the King urged Japan's sovereign to embrace the religion that captured the imagination of the rulers, as well as peoples on the mainland, and advanced the cause of peace among all nations.

Ironically, Buddhism's inspirational arrival in Asia's largest island nation had the opposite effect. It deepened the wedge between two feuding political factions. One of the influential rivals in Japan's Imperial court revered Chinese culture. Its nobles regarded China's medical, linguistic and fine arts, its architecture and religious thoughts to be far superior to their own and called for their immediate adoption. A suggestion that Buddhism, which the pro-China group considered to be a global religion, should be declared Japan's new religion raised the ire of advisors on the opposing side. They supported an indigenous religion — Spiritualism (Jpn *Shinto*) — premised upon the belief that spirits inhabited everything in Nature. According to the *Shinto* myth, chief among its spirit-deities, Japan's goddess-creator, resided in the life- and warmth-giving Sun. Moreover, its Imperial family derived their claim on the throne from the belief that they were ancestral offspring of the Sun-goddess (Jpn *Amaterasu Omikami*). As her direct descendants, all Japanese Emperors — said to be invested with the unique ability to contact her — served as her chief shamans. If the Empire turned its favor to Buddhism, traditionalists warned, its ancestral deities would abandon the Japanese nation. Subsequently, the Emperor would no longer be worshiped as a living god, and evil spirits would descend upon the land.

For a century the Japanese court argued over the will of the gods, as Chinese culture and language and the Buddhist religion slowly made their forays among the elite and educated. Eventually, tired of the infighting, a compromise was struck that gave Buddhism its imperial sanction. Buddhist clerics agreed to add Japanese deities of *Shinto* origin into the cosmic Buddhist pantheon and install those images in their temples. Subsequently, Buddhism's appeal soared among the populace.

In the eighth century, a determined Buddhist priest by the name of Saicho (c. 767-822 C.E.) founded the Heavenly Terrace/*Lotus Sutra* Sect (Jpn *Tian-tai/Hokke*) in Japan. During a religious pilgrimage to China he had been introduced to Zhi-yi's teachings and became a devout student of the *Lotus Sutra*. His lucid representations to the Imperial court that their support would bring protective cosmic forces to watch over Japan gained him a grant to build a religious and educational complex dedicated to the pacification of Japan through the unification of Buddhism. On an estate at the foot of Mt. Hiei he built a large temple edifice, a center for religious training, a ceremonial platform for ordaining priests and the island's most extensive Buddhist library. It stocked all known copies of Sakyamuni's *sutras* and thousands of related volumes, featuring Zhi-yi's commentaries on the *Lotus Sutra*.

Like his predecessor in China, chief priest Saicho defeated the Buddhist sects of his time in a debate held in the presence of the Japanese Emperor. Bestowed with the honorific name, Great Teacher Dengyo, he appeared to gain their respect for the *Lotus Sutra*. However, his attempt to recruit them into a single tent of Buddhism with his seemingly simple message — "daily rejoice in singing the praise of the *Lotus Sutra* for in so doing you will meet the Buddha" — only garnered a knowing smile. In their vacuous eyes he recognized that his efforts were premature. The time for the legacy of the *Lotus Sutra* still had not arrived. He wrote: "The true teachings (of universal enlightenment) will commence when the Counterfeit Age closes and the Age of Decadence opens."[24]

Saicho cited a document wherein the *Lotus Sutra's* translator, Kumarajiva, some five hundred years earlier related that as the 500-year eras unfolded the export of Buddhism would progress in a northeasterly direction from India. He deduced that as the *Lotus Sutra* had passed from India through China to Japan on a direct course that matched the prediction, when the time ripened the votary of the *Lotus Sutra* will make his advent in the land of Japan. Saicho rejoiced in the thought that he was preparing the way for the *Lotus Sutra's* preeminent preacher.

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[24]Dengyo, *The Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra.*

As Japan entered the widely anticipated Age of Decadence a pall of melancholy hovered over its aristocratic court. Buddhists anticipated an imminent collapse of the world as they knew it. Its portent of doom and gloom offered no salvation for anyone — no hope of escaping the evil times at hand. Although the Buddha had prophesied the second coming of a messenger invested with the mission to reveal the enlightenment embedded in all human beings, the *Lotus Sutra* had lost its voice. Only three generations from Saicho's passing, his Mt. Hiei temple complex had fallen under the influence of "new" esoteric teachings imported from China. In their hands, the import of the *Lotus Sutra* had been diminished even among the reclusive monks of the Lotus Sect. Hence, when the Age of Decadence commenced, only a few cared for the *Lotus Sutra*. Among those who knew of the *Lotus Sutra*, fewer still discerned the prophecy in it. If one could discern and believed it, he could not say exactly when in the next 500 years this advocate would appear. Even if a votary did appear, no one could determine what kind of impact his presence might have.

Under the spectre of an impending dark age, gossip, murderous plots and love affairs gripped the attention of the Imperial court. Melancholy aristocrats indulged their foreboding moods with little regard for consequences. Engrossed in apathy and self-indulgence, the Imperial house had become detached from concerns about its people. Stepping into the vacuum of governance, Japan's regional clan chieftains embarked on campaigns to expand their feudal estates. Their competitions touched off the formation of a mercenary warrior class (Jpn *samurai*) commissioned to fight for or protect clan territory. In time, the country came to be partitioned along lines of clan organization, and the most powerful clans wrestled political power from the Emperor. The new military and economic powers formed a government headed by a national overlord (Jpn *Shogun*). Near the end of the twelfth century the Imperial family foolishly attempted to marshal forces in hopes of regaining power from the feudal forces, but they were quickly vanquished. Consequently, the Imperial court endured benign house arrest in a palatial garden estate located in the traditional Buddhist city of Kyoto on the west coast of Japan. Encased in exquisite splendor, like dolls on display, the royal court continued its ceremonial duties and reveled in its private intrigues. To ensure that the Imperial family refrained from considering another revolt, the *Shogun* required that only royal infants serve as emperors.

Distancing itself from the intrigues of the royal court, the *Shogun* established a new seat of government in the eastern city of Kamakura (today's Tokyo). However, distance did not immunize the new capital from political machinations. The feudal power structure fell under the control of the Hojo clan — advisors to the *Shogun*.

To cement their position on the helm of power, they placed infants in the position of *Shogun*, just as the latter had done with the Emperor. While officially holding the post of Regent, counselor-governor and advisor to the *Shogun*, several Hojo family patriarchs controlled the *Shogunate* system for most of the thirteenth century.

While the feudalists had overtaken the imperial court, Buddhism had surpassed *Shinto* as Japan's predominant religion. The side-by-side rise of the two institutions prompted a continuation of the traditional partnership of state and religion that had been established by the Emperor and *Shinto*. The new union was apparent in the inner circles of a Regency whose councils of powerful clan leaders and their friends included chief priests of popular Buddhist temples. Consequently, relatively newer Buddhist sects devoid of historical alliances to the imperial household enjoyed the protection and benevolence of rich landowners.

Throughout Buddhism's auspicious history in India, China and Japan, clerics had been able to gain the ear of rulers. For two thousand years, they were called upon to serve as advisors to the mighty. Oftentimes, they had prevailed on despots to act with wisdom, nobility and a just temperament. Nevertheless, as the bloody recompense in China had reminded, absolute power cast a long and fearful shadow. In spite of their alliance with the government, Buddhist priests understood that the relationship was not of equal partners. In actuality, the force of Japanese feudalism held a sword over Buddhism's collective head. Regional governors could confiscate temple grounds from a sect that fell out of their favor and grant the land to priests espousing a doctrine they backed. Thirteenth century Buddhist temples found it wise to cater to the whims of the powerful by employing the doctrines and rituals that satisfied official preferences — often combining the practices of several sects under a single temple roof.

The fall of the Mt. Hiei Buddhist center that Saicho designed as an homage to the *Lotus Sutra* to an esoteric sect called *Shingon* (Secret Word) signaled the arrival from China of the Diamond Vehicle (Skt *vajrayana)* teachings. The mix of colorful doctrines extracted from Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism had coalesced in its Japanese version into a complex, meticulously constructed mystic collage composed of the Buddhist pantheon, consciousness-raising, and channeling of spirit-energies. Its proponents claimed to have surpassed Zhi-yi's brilliantly intricate matrix of Life's 3,000-fold Reality, although clearly they borrowed extensively from it. Rejecting Sakyamuni as a relatively minor Buddha among a myriad of buddhas in the greater cosmos and the *Lotus Sutra* as a teaching of relatively limited scope, they favored secret ritual dances, mystic hand gestures (Skt *mudras*) and incantations (Skt *mantras*)

directed at painted iconographs (Skt *mandalas*) purported to carry the believer into the nexus of enlightenment experienced by supernatural buddhas.

A simpler, hence more popular variation of Buddhism among the common folk of thirteenth century Japan assured its adherents of a heaven bound future. Initially practiced widely in China, this sect proposed that daily ritual chanting of the name Infinite Light Buddha (Jpn *Amida*) — guardian of a mythic Pure Land (Jpn *Jodo*) set in the western quadrant of the universe — would cause one to be reborn in his enlightened realm. Proponents believed that anyone chanting this sacred Buddha Name (Jpn *Nembutsu)* would be reborn in a paradise where all would be nurtured by the nectar of enlightenment until they transformed into celestial beings. Priests propounding this ritual guaranteed believers who enthusiastically chanted the name of Amida and made offerings to him in this life that they would surely enter his paradise in the next life. As believers desperately sought to ensure their place in his heavenly abode, the clergy received thousands of acres of land and large sums of money from wealthy contributors determined to exhibit their enthusiastic devotion for Amida. Concerning the *Lotus Sutra*, Japanese founders of the practice instructed their followers to ignore and discard it.

The doctrine of a third sect imported from China, Zen (Chn *Ch'en*), found its audience primarily among the military (Jpn *samurai*). Its priests espoused a practice of self-challenging meditations meant to uncover Life's ultimate wisdom hidden in the upper reaches of the mind. They summarily dismissed all of the *sutras* as fine in theory, but powerless in practice. The teachers of Zen compared enlightenment to the moon and considered the *sutras* as "nothing more than a finger pointing at it." Once one spotted the actual moon, they reasoned, pointing to it was moot.

Zen proponents justified their practice with the claim that Sakyamuni secretly communicated the essence of his Perfect Enlightenment to only one of his major disciples just before his death. Accordingly, the Buddha imparted his true mind to Maudgalyayana with a simple smile. In like manner, over the centuries a purported lineage of teachers silently passed on to disciples the "unspeakable truth" contained in that all-knowing smile. The school provided that reaching the absolute core of enlightened consciousness required a strict regimen of quiet meditation to increase the mind's receptivity. By gaining an increasingly focused concentration one would hone the ability to discern. By mastering the mundane mind through challenging exercises, the True Mind, a mind that saw the Truth of the Reality of All Existence, would emerge and rise to the top. From there one could see with a "universal eye" whose range embraced the land of boundless peace and fearlessness (Skt *nirvana*).

The stoic perseverance and austere concentration learned through Zen practices appealed especially to the *samurai* class. In preparing their minds for battle, warriors developed the wherewithal to calmly discern impending danger, increase the range of their awareness, narrow their focus on fighting effectively, and fearlessly look upon the face of their own inevitable death in their enemy's eyes.

Ancient India's definition of the mortal world as the land of enduring suffering (Skt *saha*) could find no better illustration on Earth than in the thirteenth century. The world was mired in poverty and violence. Human blood spilled unceasingly as the planet recoiled from barbarous conquest. The Mongolians had overrun China by the time their leader Genghis Khan died (c. 1227 C.E.), but their unbridled hordes continued to inflict terror with a vengeance. They invaded Poland and Hungary (c. 1237 C.E.). They conquered Russia (c. 1240 C.E.), then attacked middle Europe, and central and southwestern Asia (c. 1250s C.E.).

In Japan, as in the rest of the world, misery abounded. An unnatural series of colossal natural disasters ravaged a bewildered nation. The pall darkened every home as in short order floods, epidemics, fires, famines and earthquakes caused the death of fully one-half of Japan's population. Ironically, Buddhism thrived in this climate by espousing a message of salvation and solace. Primarily, its proponents promised the faithful that if they followed the instructions of their priests they would be assured of a next birth in a heavenly Lotus garden situated far across the universe in a world whose luminous beings experienced only joy and wisdom.

A notion had seized the culture that the death and destruction that had gripped Japan reflected the commencement of the Age of Decadence that the Buddha had warned of so long ago. Prompted by the thought that this terrible age reflected the decay of Buddhism, an unusual young priest-scholar arrived at the Mt. Hiei library (c. 1242 C.E.). He had been a monk since childhood. Initially he received religious training at a local temple where he learned the ritual chant of Infinite Light's name, but the practice and teachings did not satisfy him. Determined to discover ultimate wisdom, he studied every doctrine he could find only to see his curiosity increase. He grew wiser and his questions grew more incisive, but no one around him had the answers he sought. As his appetite for Buddhism prevented him from settling to a parish life, he departed on a search to unearth its essence. He journeyed across the country to several temple-libraries examining copies of every available *sutra* and related commentary. He read everything — even mastering classical Chinese to be able to do so.

Born Zennichi-maro (c. 1222 C.E.) to an ordinary fishing village family, this young man aspired to a spiritual pursuit. At the age of eleven, he began his search by donning the robes of an acolyte priest. When he turned 15, he accepted the vows of the Buddhist priesthood and was given the tonsured name of Zesho-bo Rencho. Arriving at the Mt. Hiei temple-library at age twenty, this ambitious scholar started ten years of diligent research there and at other study sites. By the end of his investigation, at age thirty-one, he had become fully versed in all of Sakyamuni's *sutras* and had arrived at its ordained destination. The ultimate message concerning the essence of the Reality of Life revealed itself to him within the *Lotus Sutra*.

> *He who reads and recites the Law-Flower Sutra knows that he has adorned himself with the adornment of the Buddha.*[25]

Feeling the *Lotus Sutra's* call to champion its cause, he changed his name to Nichiren (literally, "Sun-Lotus," a symbolic metaphor meaning "The Cause for the Illumination of Life"). His name change represented the severing of his bonds to prior religious training. In addition, it meant that hence forward he must stand alone against all odds for the sake of telling the world about the legacy the Buddha had bequeathed to all:

> *Giving myself the name Nichiren signified that I attained enlightenment by myself. This may sound boastful, but there are specific reasons for what I say.*[26]

He derived his new name from a verse in the *Lotus Sutra* — a stanza that accompanied the prophecy of the future arrival of the *sutra's* preeminent votary:

> *After the Declarer of Truth is extinct [such a one],*
> *Knowing [this] sutra that the Buddha has taught,*
> *[Together with] its reasoning and process,*
> *Shall expound it according to its true meaning.*
> *Just as the light of the sun and moon can dispel the darkness,*
> *So this man, working among the people in the world,*

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[25] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 10 - A Teacher of the Law
[26] Nichiren, Major Writings, *Letter to Jakunichibo* (c. 1279)

Can disperse the gloom of the living
And cause numberless buddha-aspirants
Finally to abide in the One-vehicle.[27]

In addition to predicting the appearance of this fearless preacher, the Buddha officially had passed the commission of the *sutra's* future propagation to Demeanor of Supreme Essence, leader of the Selfless Volunteers. Nichiren equated the two roles — the oracle of the *Lotus Sutra* had told him that the preacher-champion of the *sutra* was also the one who inherited its mission. He was convinced that while he would be alone at first many Selfless Volunteers would follow:

..."among the people" means that the first five hundred years of the Age of Decadence will witness the advent of Demeanor of Supreme Essence, who will illuminate the darkness of human ignorance and enlighten earthly desires with the torch of Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo. Nichiren's endeavor...is the work of Demeanor of Supreme Essence.[28]

Upon concluding his studies, Nichiren returned to his maiden temple, where he first accepted Buddhism as a young boy. There he publicly declared for the first time (c. 1253 C.E.) that the invocation of *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* (devotion to the *Dharma* of the *Lotus Sutra*) was the "One vehicle of buddhahood" embedded in the title of the *Lotus Sutra*. In front of the local clergy in attendance, Nichiren three times chanted the phrase: *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo.*

His former temple associates met his declaration with derisive, unrestrained anger. This monk who had no mentor and who bowed to no sect offended them with his claim that *Myoho-Renge-Kyo* was the Buddha's ultimate teaching — a view they perceived as an attack on their sect. The ensuing commotion led to a call for the local police. To avoid arrest for inciting the disorder, Nichiren had to steal away before the constables arrived.

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[27] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 21 - The Divine Power of the Tathagata
[28] Nichiren, Major Writings, *Letter to Jakunichibo* (c. 1279)

9
Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo

The compassionate Sakyamuni lamented that numerous beings passed through countless lifetimes and states-of-being without hearing the *Lotus Sutra* once, no less see its vision, embrace, maintain, understand and lend one's voice to it. If they could encounter even its precious title, he said, they would know unimaginable wonders.

> *In countless countries even the title of this Law-Flower Sutra cannot be heard, how much less can it be seen, received and kept, read and recited.*[29]

The Buddha advised that if one had the rare opportunity to discover the superb title of the *Lotus Sutra*, they should passionately accept and fiercely treasure this gift:

> *Receive and keep the title of the Law-Flower....*[30]

According to Nichiren, *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* encapsulated all the powers and virtues of the Buddha contained in the entirety of the *Lotus Sutra*. More than its title, this single phrase was the intended catalyst of enlightenment — the actual seed-vehicle of the Perfect Enlightenment possessed by Sakyamuni:

> *The buddhas, the honored ones,*
> *Know that nothing has an independent existence*
> *And the buddha-seeds spring from a cause,*
> *So they reveal the One-vehicle.*[31]

[29] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 14 - A Happy Life
[30] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 27 - Incantations
[31] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 2 - Tactfulness

For one's buddha-state to blossom, a seed of enlightenment must be embedded in the mortal being. The phrase "the buddha-seeds spring from a cause…" indicated that a stimulus was required to germinate the seed of buddhahood. Consistent with the Buddha's teaching that nothing can come into being independent of a cause, so too the raising of Perfect Enlightenment required impetus. The "buddha-seed" — representing the inherent cause of buddhahood — consisted of two components, a buddha-nature and a buddha-vehicle, as follows: (1) The nature-seed referred to a hidden core of buddhahood inherently possessed by all living beings. It had no power to appear of its own accord; and, (2) The vehicle-seed defined a force that caused the nature-seed to manifest. It referred to an inherent trigger that Sakyamuni alluded to as the "One direct vehicle of buddhahood." By equating the *Lotus-dharma* with this singularly universal vehicle, Sakyamuni offered a means for unearthing the Perfectly Endowed Reality (i.e., *Myoho*) embedded in every mortal. Thus, he left this *sutra* as his legacy — to be used for activating one's buddha-nature.

Nichiren crystallized the vehicle-seed of the *Lotus Sutra* in the invocation of *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* with *Nam* expressing veneration to *Myoho-Renge-Kyo* — the equivalent of calling upon the buddha-nature to come forward. Just as a person would respond when he heard his name called, the seed of Perfect Enlightenment similarly would become attentive when one called out its name. Accordingly, the chanting of this phrase would have a rewarding impact on one's state-of-being and sphere-of-existence. He considered this response to be natural, rather than magical, as the chanting did not defy the law of cause and effect. On the contrary, he viewed the benefits of self-transformation engendered by this practice as confirmation that *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* was the cause that awakened Life's everlasting identity.

While he declared *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* to be the causative agent responsible for the revival of Life's enlightened-nature, Nichiren held that the validity of any claim to revive Perfect Enlightenment should be put to the test. The *sutra* had said: the "One direct vehicle" will flood the senses with actual proof of its power. Those who sensed the merits of chanting will be able to confirm for themselves whether this phrase is what the s*utra* meant by, "…so they (the buddha-seeds) reveal (what is) the One-vehicle." Nichiren offered: one who revered the propitious title will prove its power, while one who witnessed its power must revere its authenticity.

The words constituting *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* conveyed a literal meaning, but a more profound definition was hidden in their subtext, as follows:

1 ***Nam*** (pronounced Naahm) — contraction of *Namu* (ref: Naahm-oo), a Sino-Japanese transliteration of the Sanskrit word *Namas*. It means

"Hail to…" or "Praise be..." (the following). To date, people in India use the word *Namas* as a customary greeting. Literally, it denotes "I devote myself to..." Hence, married Hindu women wear a *Namas* mark (dot symbol) on their forehead — to signify devotion to their husbands. The mark of devotion expresses a voluntary commitment as in "I submit myself to..." or "I pay homage to...," or "I take refuge in..." (the following). The vow's implied self-effacement suggests the devotee's highest possible regard for the venerated object or subject — a readiness to "bend, bow, or submit" oneself to the other. Herein, submission is an expression of humility, not inferiority, as indicated by the custom of bowing with two palms touching — a virtually universal gesture seen in Western religion as "praying hands." For Eastern cultures the gesticular expression of *Nam* imparts that the devotee has decided to forego his ego-self in favor of becoming "one in body and mind" with the object of devotion. Hence, *Nam* erases the line between subject and object. It denotes that the devotee and the venerated are in essence mirror images of one another and as such constitute a single entity. Specific to the *Lotus Sutra's* title, the expression of *Nam* embodies the adoration and devotion a believer offers to *Myoho-Renge-Kyo*. With proper humility *Nam* connotes the mortal devotee and *Myoho-Renge-Kyo* to be one and interchangeable.

2 ***Myoho*** (pronounced M-yo-hoe) — equivalent of the Sanskrit word *Saddharma*. A literal translation of *Myoho* describes a "Mystic Truth" or "Wonderful Law" — terms that convey the profound inexplicable wonder of All Existence. The syllable *Myo*, whose root in Sanskrit is *Sad* (pronounced S-aah-d), reflects that which is wonderful and mystic, while *Ho,* derived from the Sanskrit for "Buddha's *Dharma,"* means the Reality, Law, Cosmology or the Truth of All Existence. In addition, *Myo* means "Perfectly Endowed." The "Endowment" refers to a gift that all mortals inherently possess. "Perfect" means that it exists universally, without exception, and that it is pure. The subject of this reference is the Gift of Life, wherein Life is defined as a pure universal essence. Furthermore, the syllable *Ho* is synonymous with True Reality — as seen from the Buddha's enlightened view. It is synonymous with Life — all that it includes, the way it appears and how it evolves. Hence, the conjunction of *Myo* and *Ho* conveys that

Life, while boundless and diverse, is fundamentally enlightened and that this enlightenment resides below the surface of mortality and human cognitive reality. Moreover, *Myo* represents its vehicle-seed — the power to resurrect *Ho*, the buddha-nature. "To revive" or " return to" that enlightened nature indicates that a mortal's original state-of-being — characterized as fundamental illumination — may be raised above mortal ground. From *Myoho* one may infer that the inherently enlightened essence of Life may be awakened and that the word *Myoho* itself may be characterized as its catalyst. Hence, the invocation of *Myoho* constitutes a way for all mortals to infuse their being and experience with the mystic force of Perfect Enlightenment. Any devotee who delights in this wonderful gift would experience the illumination of his body, mind and environment.

3 ***Renge*** (pronounced Ren-gay)— literally, Lotus Flower, metaphor for Life. The seedpod of the Lotus, *Ren,* embodies the causes that give rise to everything in existence. The petals of the Lotus blossom, *Ge,* are symbolic of the effects that give substance to all that exists. Thus, *Renge* embodies the universality of cause and effect. Traditionally, Buddhism teaches that destiny is forged through cause and effect. Accordingly, the gain of good fortune (i.e., healthy mind and body, positive circumstances and harmonious relationships) is due to good acts, while experiences of suffering are retribution for negative acts. The *Lotus Sutra's* use of the word *Renge* specifically refers to a mythic White Lotus Flower (Skt *Pundarika*). It embodies the notion that the cause of enlightenment is everpresent in each moment. This Lotus is an Eternal Lotus — the symbol of Everlasting Life, which at once possesses an eternity of causes and effects. From the perspective of the *Lotus Sutra*, the Lotus blossom and seedpod depict that a single instant of Life is the repository (seedpod) of an eternity of past causes and future effects. It sees each mortal moment as a field of eternal scope. That the Lotus Flower grows in a swamp represents a mortal and immortal intersection within a single Reality of existence.

4 ***Kyo*** (pronounced K-yo) — translated from the Sanskrit for *Sutra*. Generally, the word *sutra* means a "teaching" or a "revelation" — alluding specifically to sermons or theses that the Buddha elucidated. Each *sutra* is indicative of some portion of the whole truth regarding

> the Buddha's delineation of the True Reality of All Existence. In the colorful prose of the Sanskrit language, the word *sutra* literally means "never-ending thread" or "ever-continuous string." While each *sutra* constitutes a kind of "vibration" that expresses its message like a piece of music, that every *sutra* ends with *Kyo* concatenates all the *sutras* into one perpetual *Dharma*. The syllables *Renge-Kyo* that join to form the words *Lotus Sutra* together impart that this *sutra* is the ever-continuing vibration of the Eternal Lotus (i.e., Everlasting Life). Hence, *Renge-Kyo* declares this pinnacle *sutra* to be the nexus of the whole *Dharma* — a perpetually vibrating string of "Everlasting Life."

Joining the first half of the epithet, *Nam-Myoho* (i.e., Devotion to the Perfectly Endowed Reality), with the second half, *Renge-Kyo* (i.e., Everlasting Life), completes the title as follows: "Devotion to the Perfectly Endowed Reality of Everlasting Life." Thus, the title of the *Lotus Sutra* imparts that the eternal seed of Life — the same seed that gives rise to mortal existence — is omnipresent, infinite, ever-changing, and of everlasting scope. In declaring that an Eternal Reality resonates within every fiber of mortality, the *Lotus Sutra* contends that every speck of Nature epitomizes indivisible, indestructible Perfect Enlightenment that simultaneously extends across the universe while it is self-contained within each instant and phenomenon in it.

The insertion of *Nam* before the "Perfectly Endowed Reality of Everlasting Life," gives it a personal connotation. Without the particular meaning provided by each human who declares it the definition of *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* remains incomplete. One who experiences a distinct cosmic illumination flooding his mind and body might regard the chant in this way: "I Am One With the Wonderful Cosmology of Everlasting Life;" for one who suffers hardships yet is appreciative of the profound blessings inherent in being alive, the chant might mean: "Praise Be the Bearer of the Gift of Everlasting Life For He Has Found Good Fortune;" for one who determines to share his sense of fulfillment with other beings, the phrase could be: "I Declare To All That I Feel the Everlasting Reality of Life Rising Through Me."

Nichiren concluded that repeated chanting of *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* will invite the spiritual emergence or awakening of Life's inherent endowment. Veneration of the Perfectly Endowed Reality of Everlasting Life will cause the revival of Perfect Enlightenment to manifest in the resonance of one's greater identity, the release of pure luminosity inherent in one's ultimate self, and in the sense of oneness or shared identity one can feel with all mortal beings and all phenomena in the universe.

10
The Age of Decadence

At the conclusion of the *Lotus Sutra's* Ceremony in the Air, the Buddha asked innumerable Selfless Volunteers (Skt *bodhisattva-mahasattvas*) who had sprang from below the surface to take an oath regarding the future transmission of the Perfect Enlightenment embodied therein. He called upon them to exemplify compassion for all beings by vowing to manifest as mortals at a future time for the purpose of receiving, keeping, reading, reciting and proclaiming this *sutra's* precious *Dharma*:

> *I, for incalculable (eons), practiced this rare Law of Perfect Enlightenment. Now I entrust it to you. Will you whole-heartedly promulgate this Law and make it prosper far and wide...Will you receive and keep, read and recite, and proclaim this Law abroad that all living beings universally may hear and know it? The Declarer of the Truth [of Everlasting Life] is most benevolent and compassionate, not mean and stingy, and is able fearlessly to give the gifts of Perfectly Enlightened-wisdom, wisdom of Life's absolutely True Reality, and the wisdom of the [Everlasting] existence of the Self to all living beings. The Declarer of Truth is the great lord of giving to all living beings. Will you also follow and learn the Declarer of Truth's example, not being mean and stingy?...Will you proclaim this Law-Flower Sutra?*[32]

The Selfless Volunteers replied affirmatively:

> *"We will do all that the World-honored One has commanded. Have no concern."*[33]

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[32] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 22 - The Final Commission
[33] ibid.

As the first ever to declare publicly that the "One direct vehicle" alluded to in the *Lotus Sutra* was synonymous with *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo,* Nichiren personified Demeanor of Supreme Essence, who stood at the vanguard of Selfless Volunteers as the foremost representative entrusted by the Buddha with its future revival. Prior to accepting that role, Nichiren weighed the decision to undertake this mission. Reading the *sutra's* sobering warnings regarding the unusual difficulties its votary would have to face braced him for persecution. Yet, his primary concern was that his actions would endanger the lives of all who followed him. Debating within himself whether to accept the challenge, in the final analysis an ambivalent Nichiren could not ignore the notion that if he failed to transmit the *Lotus Sutra* the ancient vow to carry it out would go unfulfilled. He chose to sacrifice caution rather than let the Buddha down. Any potential hardship that he might suffer in this lifetime appeared insignificant compared to the catastrophic consequences he envisioned if he abandoned the world to a future without the 'Vehicle of Perfect Enlightenment.'

Word spread quickly of a daring, charismatic missionary who roamed the streets of the capital city of Kamakura declaring that the *Lotus Sutra* was the Buddha's supreme teaching. Apparently, those who stopped to hear his message found it to be clear, direct, uplifting and fully supported by the text of the *Lotus Sutra*:

> *If any good son or good daughter receives and keeps this sutra, and either reads, or recites, or expounds, or copies it...because this (teacher) so excellently preaches the Law...in whatever quarter he abides, he will be able to receive and keep all the Buddha-law and also to utter the profound and beautiful sound of the Law.*[34]

Nichiren aimed at restoring the *Lotus Sutra* to prominence by challenging the established sects to a traditional Buddhist debate to be held before the Emperor. Consequently, as news of his unmatched scholarship reverberated throughout the clerical establishment, his call drew sharp rebuke. They attributed any attention he engendered to his "personal charisma" and branded him "spellbinder and slanderer," but their contrivances did not slow his progress. He took his message to village squares where the weary and the desperate gathered to hear about the wondrously transforming sound. Nichiren's lilting message reached out to people numbed by hard times — often penetrating even those who had become deaf to life's music.

[34] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 13 – Exhortation to Hold Firm

Seven years had passed from the day Nichiren declared *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* to be the Buddha's absolute intent. During that period natural disasters befell Japan at an unprecedented pace. Recurring floods, fires, typhoons, heavy rains, droughts, epidemics and famines wounded the country and left its people in a dejected mood. Death reached the corners of the land and affected nearly every family. Believing the events to be of mystic origin, the government marshalled officially supported chief priests to conjure an end to the nation's misfortunes, but the calamities only increased in frequency and intensity. Observing the ruinous results of their prayer, Nichiren used the opportunity to write a treatise on the subject and addressed it to the Hojo Regent (c. July 1260 C.E.). Aiming most of his criticism at a sect that he considered to be exploiting people's fears about their next life, he proposed that the government's blind allegiance to Buddhist doctrines that negated the *Lotus Sutra* willed by Sakyamuni caused the natural disasters. Nichiren fearlessly predicted that if Japan continued on its present religious course, it would invite further misfortune, including internal rebellion within the government and the invasion of Japan by a foreign power. Trading on traditional beliefs, he declared that protective Buddhist deities had abandoned Japan, because they could no longer bear the contamination of the Buddha's teachings. He urged the government to end its religious subsidies, and requested that it sanction an official debate among the country's Buddhist sects.

That outcome seemed unlikely in view of the close knit relationship between the predominant religious authorities and the ruling clans — a bond often cemented by marriage or economic interests. Not only did Nichiren's personal appeal to the Regent go unheeded, but copies of it quickly found their way into the hands of the clergy whom Nichiren accused of fraud — the Buddha-Name sect (Skt *Nembutsu*) that espoused the chanting of the celestial Infinite Light Buddha's name (Skt *Amida*) to be the vehicle for rebirth in a buddha-paradise. Thereafter, their enmity for him had been assured. They dubbed Nichiren a devil in monk's clothing.

With his insistence that the *Lotus Sutra* contained the "One vehicle" that the Buddha bequeathed for the Age of Decadence, Nichiren soon earned the disdain of every Buddhist sect. If the Buddhist establishment agreed on any matter, it was this — wishing for his silence. Hidden in the shadows of power, they contrived charges of "seditious activity" against him, and without investigation or trial persuaded the government to order his immediate exile to a wind-ridden, overcast and sparsely populated Izu Peninsula (c. May, 1261 C.E.). For two years the infamous monk remained under watch until the Regent dismissed his sentence for lack of evidence after receiving an appeal from the region's governor whom Nichiren converted.

Nichiren expected that as the prophesied advocate of the *Lotus Sutra* he would encounter serious opposition from corrupt men wearing the mantle of religion. The *sutra* forewarned him of such consequences:

> *Claiming to have attained what they have not....*
> *Pretending that they walk the true path....*
> *And with minds full of arrogance....*
> *In order to ruin us,*
> *To kings and ministers*
> *To (monks) and citizens,*
> *And to the other groups of priests,*
> *They will slanderously speak evil of us....*
> *In the corrupt age, vicious clergy,*
> *Knowing not the laws so tactfully preached*
> *As opportunity served by the Buddha,*
> *Will abuse and frown upon us.*[35]

Nevertheless, immediately upon his release, Nichiren returned undaunted to his pronouncements both in the capital and countryside. His success was immediate. However, as his following grew, the already fervent enmity of the *Nembutsu* clergy inflamed further. One evening (c. 1264 C.E.), on a visit to a home where a group gathered to hear him speak, Nichiren was attacked by a band of fanatics incited by *Nembutsu* priests. Armed with swords and clubs, they stormed in intending to kill Nichiren. Although wounded on the forehead and incurring a broken left hand, he narrowly escaped with his life. However, two of his defenders were murdered and others were injured. Only the *sutra* offered solace in its exhortation to hold firm:

> *After the Buddha's extinction....*
> *We will proclaim abroad [this sutra].*
> *Though in their ignorance many*
> *Will curse and abuse us*
> *And beat us with swords and clubs*
> *We will endure it all....*[36]

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[35] ibid.
[36] ibid.

Nichiren's prediction of a foreign invasion became apparent when a Mongolian delegate presented the Japanese government (c. Jan., 1268 C.E.) with an ominous message from Xanadu, palace of the Kublai Khan, Emperor of China and grandson of Genghis Khan. He demanded that Japan surrender, accept fealty in service of his mighty empire, or suffer the consequences of a merciless invasion.

Nichiren reacted to this event by writing letters to eleven high ranking officials reminding them of his treatise eight years earlier to the Regent wherein the daring monk had warned the nation's leader of a forthcoming foreign invasion — a prediction easily dismissed at the time as it never before occurred in Japanese history. His letters reiterated that the fate befalling Japan derived from the government's continued refusal to hear his call for Buddhist reformation. Once again, powerful administrators and religious allies deemed his insolence to be bordering on sedition. Wary of Nichiren's growing number of believers, they conspired to indict him for "slander of government officials and the disemination of libelous ideas." A hearing was convened and Nichiren was required to defend himself. No less a personage than Japan's chief prosecutor, Hei-no-Saemon, levied the charges. Exhibiting a forthright, calm and honest demeanor, the defendant testified eloquently and reasonably regarding his view of the role Buddhism in determining the destiny of the nation. However, as he spoke the Justice Minister became increasingly irate — repeatedly shouting outrageous and unfounded accusations at the stoic defendant.

When the tribunal adjourned to weigh the guilt or innocence of the accused, the enraged Hei-no-Saemon, whose position encompassed the government's office of chief law enforcer, decided to act on his own authority. He ordered Nichiren's immediate arrest and execution. Later that evening, a large contingent of armed troops descended upon the defenseless monk's cottage. Bursting into the house, the company commander pushed Nichiren causing one of the 10 scrolls of the *Lotus Sutra*, which Nichiren carried in his robe, to fall out. The commander picked up the fifth volume of the *sutra*, written on a roll of paper tightly wrapped around a wooden dowel. With it he three times clubbed the stalwart Nichiren in the face. Ironically, that volume contained the exhortation that a future votary would have to endure attacks made with swords and clubs.

Several hundred guards escorted Nichiren toward the execution grounds at the sandy beach known as Tatsunokuchi. As he rode upright on horseback, his eyes glared skyward at the moon and stars. The superstitious soldiers tried to ignore the bizarre specter of this infamous mystic loudly scolding the gods for not coming to his aid, but the tension could not be more palpable. Nichiren had condemned the

deities for in the *Lotus Sutra* they all had made a promise to Sakyamuni that they would protect its future votaries at all cost. That starry night (c. 1271 C.E.) at the fateful hour of 2:00 a.m. the executioner readied his blade.

Suddenly, a bright flash bleached the darkness. A cosmic anomaly, perhaps an electrical discharge or a luminous celestial object, had chosen that moment to cross the heavens. The high-strung squad immediately scattered in bewildered frenzy. Chilled by their mortal fears the troops huddled at a distance as Nichiren, left on the horse with his arms tied, called out for someone to come forward and finish the job. "It will be that much harder to do it once day breaks," he exhorted.[37] His wry humor in defiance of death froze their sensibilities. No one dared to approach.

After nearly two hours, he calmed the remaining group and prevailed upon them to release his restraints and lead him to a local inn where they could all await further instructions. At the inn, in the mood for celebration and gratitude, Nichiren treated the troops to rice wine (Jpn *sake*). They gathered around him in rapt attention, as he explained how his continuous persecutions corroborated the *Lotus Sutra's* ancient words. He encouraged them to remember the night they witnessed its cosmic illumination even if the authorities deny it. In the month that followed, the tribunal kept Nichiren under house arrest in the area while it resumed with the testimony of his detractors. Meanwhile, the inimical Hei-no-Saemon initiated a door-to-door campaign aimed at intimidating followers of Nichiren, innocent folk living in humble residences around Kamakura. Those not arrested were terrorized.

When he heard that a crackdown had caused many of his believers to doubt him and some to give up their faith, Nichiren shouldered the blame for bringing this oppression upon them. He sent word that the extraordinary adversities must be understood as expiation of one's destiny (Skt *karma*), a widely accepted Buddhist doctrine. According to the principle, personal difficulties stemmed from ignorances and indiscretions made either in past lives or in the present one. Buddhists believed that each person continuously deposited and withdrew from an account of destiny. In effect, the process of expiation constituted payment for accrued *karmic* debt. Hence, retribution cleansed one's account. Commonly, the duration and magnitude of one's recompense corresponded to the gravity of the causes that brought it about.

Although Nichiren blamed himself for creating the past *karma* that caused the apparent troubles, he attributed the extraordinary quality of his tribulations to his activities as the messenger of the *Lotus Sutra*. He regarded the level of retribution

[37] Nichiren, Major Writings, *On The Difficulty of Sustaining Faith* (c.1275)

he endured to be equal to an amount that should take many lifetimes to expiate. As all these persecutions had descended upon him at once, he reasoned, all his *karma* will be completely eradicated in his present lifetime. As was written in the *Lotus Sutra*, he reminded, whoever taught the "Perfectly Endowed Law" to others will have all his poisonous *karma* transformed into the elixir of enlightenment. Therefore, Nichiren exclaimed, rather than bemoaning his fate, he felt sheer joy at the prospect of a common person such as himself purifying all his transgressions in one lifetime. By his example he hoped to encourage others to persevere as the elixir of the *Lotus Sutra* did its work in expelling poisonous *karma* from their being.

Following his near execution Nichiren sensed a profound transformation that marked the event as his "greatest joy." He, figuratively, died that night and was reborn in a new identity.

Nichiren had considered himself to be the first of the Selfless Volunteers to arrive. From the first time he chanted *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* until his "beheading," he identified his role with that of the messianic Demeanor of Supreme Essence, the vocal representative among the four luminaries heading the Selfless Volunteers. His identification with Demeanor of Supreme Essence served to declare that the time for transmitting the *Lotus Sutra* had come. He fulfilled the prophecy of the future deliverance of the *Lotus Sutra* by personally undertaking extensive and risky travel throughout the land in leading the effort to teach *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* to people.

The Four Demeanors named in the *sutra* represented the attributes of Supreme Essence, Boundlessness, Steadfast Happiness and Purity. Each of these four had been used in earlier Buddhist texts to describe the four noble virtues of a buddha. Hence, together the four defined Perfect Enlightenment and Demeanor of Supreme Essence represented its source. In assigning the future delivery of the Supreme *Dharma* of the *Lotus Sutra* — the Perfectly Endowed Truth of Everlasting Life — to Supreme Essence, Sakyamuni had bequeathed his legacy to the "essence of Everlasting Life" and the countless legions of Selfless Volunteers who would follow in his footsteps. Having undertaken on his own the mission to declare the Law of the *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren personified the Deameanor of Supreme Essence from the start. That over time he fulfilled a list of future persecutions culminating with his near beheading finally confirmed his identity to be the Declarer of the Truth of Everlasting Life:

> *The votary of the Lotus Sutra is the Declarer of Truth* (Skt *Tathagata*).[38]

[38] Nichiren, Major Writings, *Letter from Sado* (c. 1272)

Nichiren would not and could not proclaim that he was a buddha, or publicly suggest that he possessed the ultimate identity of buddhahood. To assert it would invite ridicule and more persecution. Buddhists traditionally depicted a buddha as a supernatural being. However, Sakyamuni had redefined his identity in the *Lotus Sutra* — as the omnipresent, universal embodiment of Everlasting Life. Moreover, he proclaimed that all beings, without exception, fundamentally owned this gift of Perfect Enlightenment. In bequeathing his legacy to the mythic Selfless Volunteers, he represented that Life's eternal core will emerge in human beings. Nevertheless, this clarification had been overlooked long before Nichiren arrived on the scene.

Commonly, Buddhists considered the Perfect Enlightenment of Sakyamuni and other buddhas to be beyond the reach of mere mortals. They equated it with a rare and difficult to attain state of transcendent superconsciousness that even gods could not fathom. This belief in a cosmic hierarchy led believers to regard Buddhist monks as higher evolved mortal beings given their service to the cosmic pantheon. For their part the chief priests of various Japanese Buddhist sects or major temples fashioned themselves in colorful garbs made of fine fabrics meant to project a mystical and exalted appearance. In contrast, Nichiren wore the gray robes of a simple monk, much like the attire of Sakyamuni. While his major clerical contemporaries coveted the reverence of worshippers, reveled in popularity, and sought the expansion of their temple lands, Nichiren saw himself as a common mortal whose devotion to the Buddha precluded him from acquiescing to political forces who would surely have given him the trappings of religious power. He abhorred unscrupulous monks who projected an attractive physical stature and cultivated an air of supernatural mystery meant to entice public awe. People repeatedly fooled by such appearances eventually lost the ability to see authenticity. To them Nichiren's ordinary features would appear insufficient to convey enlightenment, although his followers clearly saw it in the undaunted demeanor exuding from his illuminated presence of mind:

> *With such disparity between my body and my mind, no wonder the foolish despise me. Without doubt, when compared to my body, my mind shines like the moon or like gold.*[39]

A month following Hei-no-Saemon's failed attempt to behead him, the hearing court sentenced Nichiren to a second exile. The ire of the cunning and powerful had

[39] ibid.

prevailed upon official judgment. This time (c. 1271 C.E.) they meant to be rid of him for good by shipping him away to Japan's most notorious destination.

Over the prior 500 years the authorities sent several hundred exiles to the island of Sado in the far north, but only a handful had returned. With inadequate food and shelter, Nichiren could expect to die on this frozen, nearly barren stretch of icy land. His two-meter square hut sat precariously in an open field cemetery. Crevices both in the roof and the walls of his lodging permitted the howling cold wind to penetrate. He spent the dimly lit days in a straw coat with only a single cushion for sitting or lying. At night, it often hailed and thundered with occasional flashes of lightning. The snows fell almost continually.

To Nichiren his second exile affirmed with certainty that he personally had met all the challenges prophesied in the *Lotus Sutra*:

> *Repeatedly shall we be driven out,*
> *And exiled afar...(we) will endure all these things.*[40]

Since Sakyamuni's time no one else had fulfilled the *sutra's* prophecies relating to the future envoy. Over the long history of Buddhism, not a single person but Nichiren experienced all of the *sutra's* prophetic persecutions — wounded by a sword, struck with a staff, nearly beheaded, and finally, exiled more than once. As the oracle of the *sutra* had omened: the person or persons who will undertake the transmission of the Buddha's legacy in the future will be willing to endure such scourges. No other individual had ever experienced the vilification of government and citizens alike specifically because of his allegiance to the *Lotus Sutra*, no less withstand it. Had it not been for the courageous Nichiren the *Lotus Sutra's* words would have proven false. The would-be champion of the *sutra* would never exist. The mission pledged by Demeanor of Supreme Essence and the Selfless Volunteers would never have materialized. If not for Nichiren, the "true intent of Buddhism" would have disintegrated into oblivion.

[40] *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 13 – Exhortation to Hold Firm

11
Supreme Treasure

Nichiren's weather-beaten shack sat precariously on the edge of nowhere. He was alone except for the elderly caretaker who brought his meager food allowance. When the steadfast Nichiren explained how he came to be there the kind man and his wife embraced his Buddhism. From that day the two, like guardian angels, aided and protected him — circumventing the intention of officials to debilitate him. At risk for their lives, they led an effort by valiant supporters to provide him with the writing materials he requested and enough cloth and straw to keep him alive. As the days and nights of his endurance passed seamlessly in this forsaken place, his thoughts constantly revisited the grandeur of the *Lotus Sutra.* He drew warmth from the image of the Treasure Tower hovering in the celestial gathering of the Lotus wonderland. Ensconced between the hell of exile and the enlightenment in his mind Nichiren decided that the time had arrived to engrave the vision before him into posterity. With a calligrapher's pen and blackened rice ink (Jpn *sumi*), he crafted a distinctive inscription onto a paper certificate about twice as long as it was wide.

As the ice melted with the advent of spring, it allowed a messenger dispatched by concerned followers to reach Nichiren. He sent back a small number of rolled copies he had inscribed — a gift to his ardent believers. He instructed its recipients to embrace it as the object of veneration when chanting *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo*. Upon unfurling the iconography, he promised, they would behold the essence of the *Lotus Sutra* — the supreme treasure of Life within him, within them, within all.

Over the ages Buddhist artistry had evolved into religious media. Enshrined in temples and memorial towers (Skt *stupa*; Chn/Jpn *pagoda*), as well as home altars, sacred paintings, sculptures and ornaments had come to be regarded as vehicles for contacting cosmic powers and the deceased, and for raising divine consciousness. While the objects varied in style, size, complexity and form, typically they centered on a motif (Skt *mandala;* literally, "cluster of blessings") that featured a buddha, one

or more divine celestial forces, and/or cosmographic maps to transcendent realms. By focusing on a sanctified figure, symbol, scene or diagram during a meditation or recitation ritual the believer purportedly assumed a state corresponding with the subject of the *mandala*. Like a virtual door leading to a greater Reality, the motif opened the way to a wealth of wisdom and joy. Consequently, one who succeeded in reaching the treasure hidden within would experience a symbiotic transference that invested him with the qualities, merits and powers embodied by the *mandala*.

Nichiren's scroll *mandala* reflected a unique design and motif. He introduced a dramatic new style to the art of Buddhist iconography. Using calligraphy he hand-lettered the names of principals assembled in the *Lotus Sutra's* Ceremony in the Air — each symbolic of a universal facet of Life. Delineated in the top-down direction of Japanese character writing, the montage of featured representatives constituted the Perfectly Enlightened Cosmography of Life — a visual equivalent to the text of the *Lotus Sutra*. Much as the attendees described in the scripture gathered around the lofty Treasure Tower, Nichiren's calligraphic figures flanked a dominant image at the locus of his depiction. Down the middle of the scroll, he inscribed the focus of his Life — his eternal dedication to the *Lotus Sutra.* There, in bold letterforms he etched the epithet: *Namu-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* — In Homage to the Perfectly Endowed Reality of Everlasting Life. Placing the expression of his faith in the revered title at the center of the *mandala* equated the epithet with the eternal treasure-trove of enlightened wisdom deposited in the grand Tower of Perfect Enlightenment.

Nichiren's Supreme Treasure *mandala* (Jpn *Gohonzon)* honored the revelation of Everlasting Life during the Lotus-shaped gathering depicted in the *sutra.* This object of veneration epitomized the Buddha's pinnacle cosmological vision, as follows: at the node of a cosmic-sized Lotus stood the monumental Tower of eternal blessings. The innumerable buddhas extending endlessly from its center were like boundless petals filling every direction of time and space. This metaphor defined buddhahood as an all-pervasive blessings-field interpenetrating every speck, realm and facet of the 3,000-great-thousandfold universe. It proposed that Perfect Enlightenment would blossom forever. Hence, every last scintilla of Life in the cosmos was infused with fundamental enlightenment. In addition, the multitude of Selfless Volunteers who emerged from below ground level to pledge the future transmission of the *sutra's* ultimate revelation constituted the seed pod of the Eternal Lotus — its cause.

Seated aloft in the *sutra's* bejeweled sanctuary, as well as at the top of Nichiren's configuration, the buddhas Abundant Treasures and Sakyamuni shared the throne

of Perfect Enlightenment. The relevancy of that metaphor was clarified in the text of the *sutra* when the Buddha told Demeanor of Supreme Essence that this throne may be mounted by future generations wherever one venerated the *Lotus Sutra*:

> *[Regarding] all [that is] proclaimed, displayed, revealed, and expounded in this sutra...after the extinction of the Declarer of the Truth, you wholeheartedly should receive and keep, read and recite, explain and copy, cultivate and practice it as the [quintessential] teaching...whether in a temple, a grove, or under a tree, in a monastery, lay devotee's house or a palace, in a valley, a mountain, or a wilderness, in all these places you must erect a sanctuary... Know that [all] these spots are the thrones of enlightenment. On these [spots] buddhas attain Perfect Enlightenment; on these [spots] buddhas roll the wheel of the Law; on these [spots] buddhas ultimately [enter] eternity.*[41]

Here the Buddha stated that wherever one lived, embraced and practiced this *sutra*, one should erect a place of veneration to it. The Declarer of Truth would deem such a spot to be the "sanctuary" of buddhahood, wherein the devotee can "attain buddhahood, teach the Law, and enter immortality." This sanctuary would house three "thrones" of Perfect Enlightenment upon which the Buddha sat, as follows: (1) the throne of fathoming buddhahood (symbolizing that any place where one embraced the *Lotus Sutra* was equivalent to the sacred spot under the *Bodhi* tree where Sakyamuni, seated in meditation, first awakened his Perfect Enlightenment); (2) the throne of enlightened wisdom (indicating that any place where one uttered the *Lotus Sutra* was tantamount to the place where Sakyamuni had transmitted the *Dharma* to his followers, as he did personally for 50 years from the moment he arose from his seat of enlightenment to the day he passed forth); and (3) the throne of eternity (conveying that any spot where one put the *Lotus Sutra* into practice was synonymous with the Ceremony in the Air, in which all in attendance arose to the level of Perfect Enlightenment, as the Buddha revealed the secret of Everlasting Life).

The three thrones mirrored three kinds of enlightened identities that Sakyamuni had unveiled in stages throughout his course in his effort to illuminate the scope of his being. He explained that he possessed three bodies — each a personification representing one aspect of his Perfect Enlightenment. He crafted the Doctrine of the Three Bodies to convey a universal identity of the mortal being, as seen from the

[41] *Lotus Sutra,* Chapter 21 - The Divine Power of the Tathagata

Buddha's enlightened vantage. However, given that humans commonly remained unaware that they owned a greater cosmic self transcending mere biological form, Sakyamuni featured himself as the model for this view. He set out to exhibit how his three bodies defined the true scale of a living being. Through various *sutras* the Buddha illustrated this doctrine by appearing to speak in one of three voices — each a reflection of one or another of the three aspects that constituted the whole of his enlightened self: manifest-buddha, wisdom-buddha, and cosmic-buddha.

He defined these three buddha-bodies as follows:

1. **Manifestation-body** — referring to his earthly manifestation, his physical incarnation and his appearance as an enlightened mortal being.
2. **Wisdom/Bliss-body** — a composite "body" encompassing his innumerable lifetimes; it housed individual *karma,* but due to his Perfect Enlightenment it had been totally purified of all negativity, ignorance and unhappiness. This intangible formation of his enlightened wisdom and bliss was composed of unlimited blessings and spiritual joy.
3. **Cosmic-body** — this was the singularity that encompassed all phenomena, although its essence, nature and scope transcended the bounds of mortality and relativity. At once a universal and absolute identity it was composed of boundless compassion for innumerable Wisdom/Bliss-bodies that emanated from it. This "body" constituted the core of buddhahood.

In his Manifestation-aspect Sakyamuni was the one who physically sat under the *Bodhi* tree and fathomed buddhahood; in his Wisdom-aspect he had taught the *Dharma* of Buddhism over countless existences; in his Cosmic-aspect he personified the boundless singularity of Life encompassing all of existence. This buddha-trinity together composed the complete body of the Buddha. Similarly, the three thrones alluded to in the *Lotus Sutra* formed the one whole seat of Perfect Enlightenment.

As the three thrones provided the seat that the three buddha-bodies would take when they appeared, their combined presence suggested that the instant one would invoke this *sutra* the Buddha would come forth on the spot. As the whole buddha-body was a synonym for Perfect Enlightenment, the mounting of the three thrones by one who venerated this *sutra* meant that Perfect Enlightenment would emerge within the Life of any person who lauded the virtues of the *Lotus Sutra.* Hence, the spot where one venerated it constituted the seat of Perfect Enlightenment. An altar erected for that purpose would reflect the sanctuary where one may cause Perfect Enlightenment to emerge in his Life.

From the start of his course the Buddha had intended to reveal the full measure of the enlightened identity he had awakened in himself — in metaphoric terms, to reveal his whole body would constitute the revelation of Perfect Enlightenment. Finally, in the Ceremony in the Air he did so by bringing the three bodies together.

At the mythic gathering described in the *Lotus Sutra* the three bodies appeared in the same place at the same time for the first time. Sakyamuni's physical presence counted as buddhahood's Manifestation-body. The arrival of the virtual figure of Abundant Treasures Buddha (Jpn *Taho)* represented the presence of the diaphanous Wisdom-body of buddhahood. The Enlightened One's Cosmic-body appeared as a composite of the innumerable buddhas who had emanated from the Buddha since time began. That they filled every direction in the universe, yet required more room beyond the limits of time-space to contain them represented the boundless cosmic scale of buddhahood. The unprecedented conjunction of the three bodies of Perfect Enlightenment in the *Lotus Sutra* announced that the whole being of the Buddha was present for all finally to see.

In mythic terms the conjunction of the buddha-bodies reflected a total eclipse of humanity's definition of itself. Emulating the movement of the Sun, Moon and Earth into perfect alignment, the formation of the trinity marked nothing less than the momentous redefinition of the identity of humankind, as viewed through the telescopic vantage of enlightened vision. The event defined the human entity as one that extended beyond earthly existence and beyond a multiplicity of manifestations. It divulged that one cosmic-body constituted the inherent essence of all the living. Accordingly, the buddha-trinity defined Life as a boundless singularity that sent forth innumerable Wisdom-bodies composed of countless Manifestation-bodies. In turn, all human manifestations possessed a Wisdom-body that carried their *karma*, while at the core of their being was the Cosmic-body that housed the treasure of Perfect Enlightenment .

The redefinition declared that every mortal being, regardless of the brevity of its lifespan or its relative size, shared with all other beings a fundamental essence that encompassed past, present and future, form and formlessness and embodied the universal laws of dynamics, including causes and effects, change and order.

Earlier in his course, Sakyamuni had challenged traditional doctrines of his time by proposing that the large-scale universe, gods (natural forces) and earthly beings were all mortal entities, although the length of their existence differed substantially. However, the Buddha added, as all mortals transmigrated across the vast field of existence, they also constituted beings who transcended the relative boundaries of

form, time and space, death and impermanence. Accordingly, all mortals traveled across existence on a cosmic journey seeking ultimate fulfillment and meaning, even if they were unaware of this deep and abiding purpose. His followers believed that Sakyamuni had been the first man ever to achieve the reward that a human being may gain after aspiring for eons of lifetimes in pursuit of Life's ultimate wisdom. Nevertheless, as they viewed the awesome conjunction of the buddha-trinity in the *Lotus Sutra,* they no longer could be sure that this scenario explained exactly when and why his Perfect Enlightenment emerged.

As soon as the buddha-trinity had converged, it had become apparent to the audience that the three actually constituted a single enlightened identity. They understood instantly that Sakyamuni only conveyed them as three separate aspects as a matter of expediency meant to lead his followers to the critical mass that now loomed in the *Lotus Sutra.* The disciples whom Sakyamuni invited to witness the Ceremony were about to discover that the most vivid display of buddhahood's presence among all the *sutras* still did not constitute the ultimate revelation of the Buddha's identity.

The stage had been set for his most astonishing revelation, as the Buddha asked the congregation if anyone among them would be willing to be born in a future age for the purpose of teaching humanity the profundity of what had transpired at this Ceremony. Although they enthusiastically volunteered for the mission, Sakyamuni graciously declined his followers' offer to carry it out. Rather, he declared, the task would belong to a special group of beings who for countless eons had inhabited a space devoid of relativity beneath the surface of existence. More than anyone in the universe they embodied the essence of enlightenment, its exceptional joy and wisdom and the steadfast courage it would require to teach it. Their minds were so purely selfless that he could rely on them never to be distracted from this task.

As Sakyamuni called them forth, inconceivable numbers of luminous beings emerged from underground and continued to rise through the air. Except for the buddhas in attendance, no one present had ever seen or heard of them — not even the celestial *bodhisattvas* who presumably had visited every region of the universe. Yet, this multitude of venerable personages all appeared to be much older and wiser than Sakyamuni. The perplexed audience wished to know how the Buddha knew them. In a shocking revelation, the Buddha stated that he had been mentor to these Selfless Volunteers since before the beginning of time. Thus, he admitted that he had been Buddha for eternity — a secret that he alone had known from the start of his course, but could not share earlier as it would have been unbelievable.

While the Buddha's words came from the mouth of Sakyamuni, his identity as the Eternal Buddha transcended his earthly designation as the former prince who had attained Perfect Enlightenment in India. The revelation that he had always been the Buddha negated the assumption that he had attained enlightenment for the first time as Sakyamuni. Rather, it implied that throughout eternity there was only One Buddha; that all the buddhas ever to appear in any universe throughout eternity had emanated from this One Buddha — the perennial source of Perfect Enlightenment; as all buddhas were Declarers of Truth (Skt *Tathagata)* they shared one Truth about enlightnement — personified by one common identity of Everlasting Life; as all of them regarded the *Lotus Sutra* to be their final revelation, each buddha's final words revealed the Declarer of the Truth of Everlasting Life.

In hindsight all present were able to see that the three-bodies of buddhahood assembled in the Air had enabled them to see the Declarer of the Perfectly Endowed Truth of Everlasting Life (ref: *Tathagata of Myoho-Renge-Kyo*). Subsequently, when the Ceremony neared to a close, the Buddha willed the *sutra's* legacy to its future declarers led by Demeanor of Supreme Essence. Representing the fundamental cause of Everlasting Life inherent in all beings, the Selfless Volunteers promised to transform the future condition of humanity by reviving the eternal buddha-nature.

While Sakyamuni's revelation of the Buddha's eternal identity defined the apex of Buddhism, for Nichiren it construed the seed of Buddhism — its inception. This event constituted the quintessential nexus of Buddhism. It defined the fruition of the quest for Perfect Enlightenment and, simultaneously, the vow to embark upon it. Herewith, the *Lotus Sutra* offered a doctrine that at once explained the origin of Life, the purpose of Existence, and the identity of being, as follows: (1) existence on a cosmological scale was eternally cyclical, with its beginning and end occurring at once; (2) every mortal being was also fundamentally immortal — possessing at his core the Perfectly Enlightened Reality of Everlasting Life.

Nichiren observed that the full scope of a being's eternal identity encompassed the trinity of Life at once. He illustrated this concept by equating the Cosmic-body with the Moon; one's Wisdom-body with the light issuing from the Moon at night; and, one's Manifestation-body with the shimmering image of the Moon reflecting on the surface of a still pond. From the standpoint of the complete identity of Life, he observed, the "Eternal Reality" produced a "cluster of blessings" that illuminated "mortal existence." This confluence was the basis for Nichiren's inscription of the Supreme Treasure *mandala* — the embodiment of the cluster of blessings that would

facilitate the emergence of the human being's eternal identity. The *sutra's* text had represented the basis of that identity in the three buddha-bodies. In the Supreme Treasure *mandala* Nichiren assembled the cosmic, wisdom and manifest identities that all beings possessed. As such, the icon acted as a nexus for the immortal and mortal self — the role served in the *Lotus Sutra's* text by the Ceremony in the Air. His purpose was to provide any believer, without exception, the vehicle for raising the "Eternal Reality" in his Life and experiencing its transformative blessings.

Sakyamuni had confirmed Nichiren's approach near the end of the *Lotus Sutra*:

> *For gods and men, these three kinds of buddha-bodies are*
> *the blessings-field, and the supreme object of veneration.*[42]

Nichiren encapsulated the bounty of the *Lotus Sutra* in objectifying the Supreme Treasure of Everlasting Life. Accordingly, by viewing the venerable phrase praising the Perfectly Endowed Reality of Everlasting Life drawn down the center of the *mandala*, and correspondingly chanting *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo,* the believer caused the eternal body of Everlasting Life to emerge in his mortal body, his state-of-being and his sphere-of-existence. The enlightened fountainhead of Life would respond by sending innumerable blessings flowing through its human manifestation.

At the bottom of his depiction, directly below this focal designation, Nichiren signed his name. Its placement after the title of the *Lotus Sutra,* as if it constituted one continuous name, reflected Nichiren's oneness with it. By writing his signature in that position Nichiren revealed his own essential identity to be the Declarer of the Truth of Everlasting Life. In addition, the signature suggested that a common mortal and his immortal identity were inseparable realities — depicting Everlasting Life and all mortal beings to be in essence one and the same entity.

> *There is no Treasure Tower other than the figures of the men and women*
> *who embrace the Lotus Sutra...those who chant Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo,*
> *irrespective of social status, are themselves the Treasure Tower....You may*
> *think you offered gifts to the Tower of the Buddha Abundant Treasures,*
> *but that is not so. You offered them to yourself. You, yourself, are the*
> *Declarer of the Truth who possesses the three enlightened bodies.*[43]

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[42] *Sutra of Meditation on Bodhisattva Universal Virtue* (postscript of the *Threefold Lotus Sutra)*
[43] Nichiren, Major Writings, *Letter to Abutsubo* (c. 1272)

Across the top of the icon, Nichiren scripted the names of the buddha-figures featured in the *sutra's* cosmic proceedings — Sakyamuni, Abundant Treasures, and the four noble luminaries leading the Selfless Volunteers. At each corner on the Supreme Treasure *mandala*, Nichiren inscribed one of the names of four Heavenly Kings. They assured the collective peace and harmony of the cosmos.

The *mandala* also included representatives of three sequential congregations to assemble at the Ceremony in the Air: (1) Sakyamuni's disciples — a collection of humans, elemental spirits and deities. They constituted various mortal phenomena inhabiting the universe, including sentient and insentient beings, microcosmic and macrocosmic entities, powers and forces inherent in Nature; (2) the Buddhas from the Ten Directions — these buddhas implied that buddhahood was omnipresent in every state-of-being (i.e., Ten Worlds) throughout the universe. They conveyed that the wisdom of Perfect Enlightenment permeated the universe. They testified that its eternal blossom emerged from the buddha-seed revealed in the *Lotus Sutra*; and, (3) the Selfless Volunteers — their legions divined the germination of the seedpod of Everlasting Life ensconced below cognition. The surface they sprang through symbolized mortal desires; the air they alighted upon denoted absolute wisdom.

The Supreme Treasure *mandala* defined existence as a single eternal field — the 3,000-great-thousandfold cosmos — upon which countless manifestations of Life confronted ignorance and danger in a search for their origin. Nichiren declared that chanting the title-phrase would cause the blessings of this Supreme Treasure — the essential identity hidden in one's inner being — to transform one's mortal world.

Subsequent to his near execution, while in exile on frigid Sado island, Nichiren inscribed the Supreme Treasure *mandala* for the first time. To him the tribulations coinciding with the prophesies of the *Lotus Sutra* signaled that the moment had come to provide human beings with access to Perfect Enlightenment. Constituting the fulfillment of the *sutra's* legacy, his iconograph "declared" the omnipresence of Everlasting Life. In a manner consistent with the Eternal Buddha named in the *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren regarded himself as the living omen that a myriad of common mortals were destined to unearth universal enlightenment. Abhorring the display of superior airs exhibited by religious leaders of his time, his allegiance to this cause had been purely for the sake of others.

During his numbing cold isolation Nichiren inscribed one of the first of his Supreme Treasure *mandalas* for the caretaker who had risked his life to provide the exile with bearable quarters and subsistent meals. In an accompanying message the

grateful Nichiren wrote that even before he was born he harbored the intention to give this Supreme Treasure to humanity — for it to be employed individually by all whose hearts yearned to fathom the Truth of the Reality of All Existence.

> *Faith like yours is so extremely rare that I inscribed the Supreme Treasure especially for you...This is the reason for my advent in this world.*[44]

When the frozen sea isolating Sado island from the mainland receded at the end of the season, Nichiren forwarded replicas of the Supreme Treasure (Jpn *Gohonzon*) to several devoted believers. Those who received one of his precious iconographs fully appreciated the ironic twist that while he was beset by dire circumstances the indomitable Nichiren's thoughts remained only for them.

He rendered one of his first issues to a devout physician and his wife whose year-old infant daughter faced a confounding life-threatening illness. In a sensitive, resolute tone he encouraged the parents to invoke the power of Everlasting Life — the medicine prescribed by the Buddha. In the parable of the Physician-Father who cured his children of dementia, the *Lotus Sutra* had revealed that its *Dharma* was vested with healing power. Accordingly, fundamental vulnerability to illness grew out of mortal fear — most acutely, of death. The accumulation of such fears over a span of lifetimes produced a *karmic* poison that manifested in physical and mental sufferings. While the consequences stemming from the illusion of death manifested in ill health, those who turned to the vehicle of eternal life found an antidote.

Therefore, Nichiren wrote, like a lion attacking its prey, one who courageously chanted *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* attacked the root cause of serious illness:

> *I hope that you will always cherish the Supreme Treasure which I sent for her (your daughter's) protection....I want you to believe in this mandala with all your heart. Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle?....I, Nichiren, therefore have inscribed my life in sumi (ink), so that you may believe with your whole heart....If you consider the blessings of the Lotus Sutra, you will find the state of immortality before your very eyes.*[45]

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[44] ibid.

[45] Nichiren, Major Writings, *Reply to Kyo'o* (c.1273).

Nichiren's lifelong goal was to cure mortals of their suffering by providing them with the Supreme Treasure of Everlasting Life — the legacy endowed to all in the *Lotus Sutra*. All who turned to it by invoking *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* called forth the buddha-within. Nevertheless, Nichiren cautioned against the view that blessings emerged supernaturally from the external object of the Supreme Treasure *mandala*. He did not want his icon to be regarded as having an independent power source — apart from the human being. Nichiren defined his *mandala* as an extension of one's intrinsic identity — an ultimately cosmic identity. He did not want his *mandala* to be confused with idolatry — the purported possession of divine, magical, mystical or spiritual powers in an object responsive to prayer or donations. He warned that enlightenment can never be extracted from an external source.

> *You must never seek any of Sakyamuni's teachings or the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the universe outside yourself...If you seek enlightenment outside yourself, any discipline or good deed will be meaningless. For example, a poor man cannot earn a penny just by counting his neighbor's wealth, even if he does so night and day.*[46]

Nichiren offered that his *mandala* provided a metaphysical conduit enabling an individual to tap the eternal blessings-field inherent within Life. To clarify that point, he cautioned that such blessings did not literally emanate from any external spiritual source. Consequently, he cautioned, mistaking an external representation for the real source of blessings turned enlightenment on its head. Rather the act of honoring the Supreme Treasure [of Everlasting Life], he explained, energized the enlightened core residing within the believer's eternal life-essence. As under any circumstances one's environment was inseparable from one's inner self, Nichiren concluded, the veneration of the universal *mandala* of eternal enlightenment was also inseparable from absolute reality — the actual source of enlightened mortal existence.

> *Never seek this Supreme Treasure outside yourself. The Supreme Treasure exists only within the mortal flesh of us ordinary people who embrace the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo. The body is the palace of…the unchanging reality that reigns over all life's functions.*[47]

[46] Nichiren, Major Writings, *On Attaining Buddhahood* (c. 1255).
[47] Nichiren, Major Writings, *The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon* (c. 1277).

12
Causes and Effects

Nichiren survived eighteen months in frigid isolation, when finally the Regent-Governor of Japan granted his pardon. He had endured two life-threatening exiles before the government finally acknowledged that his treatment was unjustified:

> *[The late and present Regents] pardoned me, Nichiren, when they found I was innocent of the accusations against me. Henceforth, the Regent will no longer take action on any charge without confirming its validity.*[48]

Immediately upon Nichiren's return to the mainland (c. 1274 C.E.), he was summoned to the capital of Kamakura for an informal discussion with the minister of justice, Hei-no-Saemon, regarding the fate of the nation. Following the rejection of the Mongolian Empire's ultimatum to surrender the country, Regency officials feared an imminent attack. At their behest the minister sought the counsel of the maverick priest who earlier had prophesied the invasion. The usually contentious Hei-no-Saemon greeted Nichiren with overt deference — the kind usually reserved for personages of high standing whose cooperation was coveted. Hoping to use the monk's mystic foresight to learn information of benefit to Japanese defense efforts, he politely asked Nichiren to divulge his prognosis on the impending threat.

Without hesitation Nichiren informed him that the Mongolian Chinese would invade within the year. He then proceeded to sternly rebuke the government for repeatedly ignoring the root cause that brought this misfortune upon the nation. Nevertheless, still unable or unwilling to consider that the sanctity of Buddhism, or lack of it, had been relevant in determining Japan's political and military crisis, the ruling powers — for a third time — ignored the resolute monk's recommendations.

[48] Nichiren, Major Writings, *On the Persecutions Befalling the Buddha*

Nichiren departed the capital for a far off mountain retreat — never to return. His retirement from personal involvement in secular matters followed a long-held Buddhist tradition: if a sage remonstrates with his sovereign three times, and is rebuffed three times, he must retire to seclusion and let the consequences unfold. After 20 years of personally leading the revival of the *Lotus Sutra* throughout the land, Nichiren chose to retreat to a remote, secluded location along the foothills of Mt. Minobu wherefrom he prepared to fulfill his final objective.

Six months following his last admonition (c. 1274 C.E.), the Mongolian forces mounted a preliminary attack on the southernmost islands of Japan. Although they incurred sizable casualties, the staunch Japanese resistance repelled the invaders. Seven years later (c. 1281 C.E.), Kublai Khan's charges returned with a second and significantly larger naval force. The first wave of warships landed on Japan's shores and inflicted heavy losses, while the bulk of the armada assembled in anticipation of landing along the entire coastline of Japan. However, before they could move into position for action, they suddenly were accosted by a devastating typhoon. Its powerful winds swept across the bows of the Mongolian ships, sinking or crippling most of them, and abruptly ending the invasion. The timely advent of the storm — dubbed "Divine Winds" (Jpn *Kamikaze*) — saved Japan from certain disaster.

While government persecution of Nichiren naturally subsided following his withdrawal to a mountain retreat, antagonisms and recriminations directed at his growing number of new believers continued at the local level. One such episode occurred in the peaceful village of Atsuhara where a large number of rice farmers and their families embraced Nichiren's Buddhism. The local Buddhist priest, angry at the wholesale abandonment of his parish, conspired with the help of a small band of supporters to stop the trend. They contrived a diabolical plot meant to discredit Nichiren's Buddhism. Soon, a disturbing incident — a hit-and-run murder stabbing — took place at night. Witnesses who reported seeing figures running from the scene had said that the perpetrators cried out *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* as they fled. Although no positive identifications had been made, suspicions had been cast upon Nichiren's followers. Consequently, the spurned local priest persuaded the town magistrate to indict all of Nichiren's local supporters.

Seeking their arrest, a group of constables rode on horseback to the rice fields where most of Nichiren's believers worked. Accompanied by the insidious priest and his band of co-conspirators, the police entered the fields. Spotting the workers, the indignant conspirators yelled "get the murderers" and caused the mounted

brigade to stampede. The scattering farmers managed to avoid being trampled, as such none of them was injured or killed. Nevertheless, the magistrate did arrest 20 of the field workers. Ironically, during the charge the horses threw off four of the mad conspirators — those actually responsible for the crime. They all soon died of severe internal injuries.

Hearing of the arrests in Atsuhara, Nichiren wrote to government officials on behalf of the innocent farmers, but to no avail. Meanwhile, the evil-minded priest who secretly crafted the incident offered to bring his conciliatory influence to bear upon the area's justice officials — on one condition. He would bargain for clemency, if only the villagers would switch their religious allegiance. Nevertheless, none agreed to abandon their faith. Impressed by the valiant stand of these ordinary folk, Nichiren sent letters of encouragement to the faithful peasants. He recalled his own personal tribulations and offered his profound admiration for their firm resolve.

Unfortunately their steadfastness only added to their woes as the strange case came to the attention of Hei-no-Saemon, still the most powerful legal official in the country. Although customarily a local magistrate handled local cases, Nichiren's old nemesis decided to enter the picture personally.

Hei-no-Saemon appointed himself the presiding judge in the mass trial of the farmers held publicly in an open field. He took that opportunity to display the wide range of his authoritarian power by investing in himself the additional roles of chief prosecutor and executioner. He repeatedly warned the accused believers that if they did not abandon their faith in Nichiren, they would be confessing their guilt. As the farmers remained stoic and firm in their innocence, his anger escalated. Finally, in the most intimidating manner, he threatened them with the penalty of death, if they did not comply. When still they refused to acquiesce, he ordered the beheading of three brothers from among the 20 farmers — a sentence carried out immediately on that spot.

Just weeks prior to that ruthless judgment Nichiren had decided that the time had arrived (c. 1279 C.E.) to fulfill his final objective. Moved by the ordinary and uneducated folk who had displayed such unshakable faith in the *Lotus Sutra*, he eyed a future when others would follow in his footsteps. He viewed the devotional courage of these common people as an omen signaling the start of the emergence of the mythic Selfless Volunteers who had promised in the *Lotus Sutra* that they would not be deterred from their mission to enlighten the mortal realm. Nichiren inscribed a large *mandala* (nearly the height of a person) dedicated to all who would pledge their allegiance to the *Lotus Sutra's* legacy throughout the Age of Decadence.

He commissioned an engraver to carve the letterforms onto a thick wooden block fashioned to survive for millennia. Upon it, he added the dedication: "to all the world for 10,000 years and more." This commemorative *mandala* — later lacquered and etched with golden letters — constituted the Universal Supreme Treasure (Jpn *Dai-Gohonzon*) bequeathed to all humanity for all time.* It embodied Nichiren's legacy to posterity.

Fourteen years following the injustice perpetrated at Atsuhara (c. 1293 C.E.), the custom of placing infant *Shoguns* at the head of the *samurai* government ended as the last of the Hojo clan Regent-Governors succumbed to an internal rebellion — as Nichiren had predicted.[49] In their place an adult *Shogun* reassumed control of the Kamakura government for the first time in nearly 100 years. However, the *Shogun* soon had to confront a mutiny instigated by the still ambitious Hei-no-Saemon, whom the new *Shogun* earlier had appointed as his chief of military forces. This treacherous grab for power was met with an efficient and decisive military response ending swiftly with the capture of the traitor and his supporters. Consequently, the *Shogun* ordered the beheading of Hei-no-Saemon and his favored youngest son, and the exile of his eldest son to Sado Island. Ironically, his execution took place in the same field where the ruthless prosecutor had decapitated the Atsuhara farmers.

Nichiren did not live to know of the brutally ironic retribution Hei-no-Saemon suffered at the end. Nine years earlier (c. 1282 C.E.), Nichiren passed on peacefully at the age of 60. Feeling somewhat ill, he had departed his mountain retreat for a local hot mineral spring. Feeling too weak to complete the journey, he stopped along the way at the home of a devout believer. There he spent his last days surrounded by a small group reverently chanting *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo.*

Posthumously, Nichiren's successors conferred upon him the honorific title of *Daishonin* (literally, Supreme Sage of the Law; figuratively, Quintessential Embodier of the Perfectly Endowed Reality). ■

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* The Universal Supreme Treasure (Jpn *Dai-Gohonzon*) is housed at the Nichiren Shoshu temple estate, Taisekiji, located at the foot of Mt. Fuji, Japan.

[49] Nichiren, *Treatise to the Hojo Regent* (c. 1260)